



10

Gakuto
Mikumo

ILLUSTRATION BY
Manyako

STRIKE THE BLOOD

BRIDE OF THE DARK GOD

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM



10 STRIKE THE BLOOD

BRIDE OF THE DARK GOD

Gakuto Mikumo
Illustration by Manyako



Yukina Himeragi

Sword Shaman

The Lion King Agency's
beautiful observer

Kojou Akatsuki

Blood Servant

Servant of the primogenitor,
unaware and undying



Astarte
Homunculus
Pure, doll-like host
of a Beast Vassal

Yume Eguchi
Succubus
The young successor to the
Witch of the Night

Kanon Kanase
Faux-Angel
The kindhearted
Saint of Middle School

Nina Adelard
The Great Alchemist of Yore
Immortal metallic life-form that
is the pinnacle of alchemy



Tobias Jagan

Vampire of the Evil Eye
Ferocious, fiery young nobleman
of the Warlord's Empire

Kira Lebedev

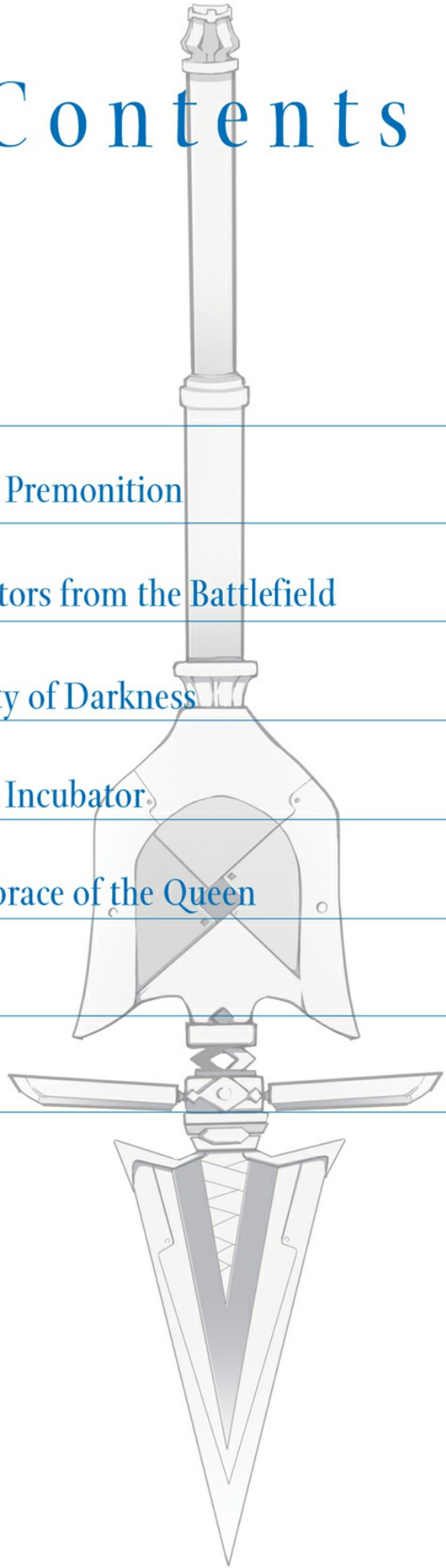
Vampire of the Phantom
Elegant, dark young nobleman
of the Warlord's Empire

Celesta Ciate

Bride of the Dark God

Icon of a foreign land's divine king





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STRIKE THE BLOOD

BRIDE OF THE DARK GOD

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GAKUTO MIKUMO

ILLUSTRATION BY
MANYAKO

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PRESS
NEW YORK

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STRIKE THE BLOOD, Volume 10

GAKUTO MIKUMO

Translation by Jeremiah Bourque Cover art by Manyako

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INTRO

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The world was dyed white.

The forest had become shrouded in thick mist with the setting of the sun.

Snowflakes fluttered down from the cloudy sky, coating the landscape in a blanket of frost.

With uncertain steps, a lone figure walked down the frigid, powdery path.

She was young—six, perhaps seven years old—and bore a striking visage.

Illuminated by the fleeting rays of sun, her cheeks were as pale as the breaths trickling from her modest lips.

She wore a baggy coat much too large for her stature, but she was beautiful nonetheless.

And yet, with her lips so tightly pursed, the look on her face was nowhere near as innocent as her apparent age would indicate.

Disregarding the pain in her chilled fingers, the girl continued to walk in silence. Her large eyes, which gave no hint toward her emotions, looked like beautifully crafted glass.

A young woman dressed in priestess attire was leading the emotionless girl by the hand.

Though mindful of the young girl's endurance, the woman advanced down the dusky mountain path without hesitation, heedless of the poor visibility. Over her shoulder, she was carrying a black musical instrument case that clashed with her traditional clothing.

Neither exchanged a word as they walked amid the falling snow.

How long did they continue walking like that?

Finally, the woman came to a halt.

She looked behind her, as if sensing some malevolent presence pressing upon them.

Thanks to the fresh snow dancing in the wild, the pair left no footprints behind. It should have been difficult to track them by scent. Even so, her senses told her loud and clear that someone was pursuing them.

The woman in priestess attire squatted, looking into the girl's eyes, and gently stated, "If you continue straight down this path, there is a shrine. Go— I shall impede them."

That instant, for the first time, a look of concern floated into the girl's previously impassive eyes. Strength entered her slender fingers, as if to keep a firm hold of the woman's hand.

Her reaction made the woman in priestess attire exhale and smile gently.

The quiet girl possessed excellent Spirit Sight. Perhaps, in that instant, she had seen the fate that now awaited her.

"You will be all right on your own. Take this—a protective charm."

Speaking these words, the woman snapped a lowlying branch beside her and gently used it to decorate the breast of the girl's coat.

The branch, bearing what looked like sharp thorns, had a twig with red, ripe berries attached. It was a *hime hiiragi* branch—holly Osmanthus—said to possess the power to ward off evil. Using what little ritual energy remained to her, the woman cast a spell upon the branch. Though it was a makeshift talisman, it would surely lead the girl true. At least until she could reach High God Forest's barrier...

"The Lion King Agency shall protect you. Now go."

Speaking the words with strength in her voice, the woman in priestess garb stretched her hand to the case on her back, inside of which was a weapon: a *naginata* cast in silver-colored metal. The countless chips marring the blade illustrated the ferocious combat the two had faced up to that point.

From behind, the woman coaxed the girl forward, who then bit her lip and silently broke into a run.

Though tripped up by the storm numerous times, she desperately continued onward.

As the strong wind blew her hair about, her tears were as white as the falling snow.

And the snow fell ever fiercer...



A forest in the middle of summer. A sweltering tropical rain forest.

The atmosphere was stiflingly humid. The sun's rays were powerful.

The ground was covered with densely packed trees, denying entry to would-be invaders. Richly colored birds danced in the sky. Under the fallen leaves, insects roamed in search of carrion.

The atmosphere was pungent with the aromas of ripened fruits and dazzling flowers, their names obscure. The entire dense forest was immersed in the vivid, raw presence of life and death.

From atop an altar, old and fashioned from stone, she gazed at the scenery.

In a small temple hidden deep in the dense forest, a lone girl was connected to the altar at its center.

She had smooth brown skin and honey-colored hair. She had a beautiful face with vestiges of childhood. Her ornate clothes were colored silver, somehow seeming well suited to the ruler of a temple.

However, her expression was frozen in fear and despair.

An abundance of fresh blood filled her entire field of vision. The corpses of the priests rightfully protecting the temple were cruelly heaped together in her surroundings.

Soldiers in military uniforms had been the ones to slaughter the priests.

Moving as one, they rushed toward the altar room where she was, seizing control of the temple.

The few surviving priests desperately continued to resist, but it was clear that their efforts were futile. There was nothing they could do, crushed by the small

group of soldiers armed with powerful firearms and sorcery.

However, she did not budge. Her entire body remained as still as a statue, not moving a single fingertip of her own will. Unable to even close her eyelids, she simply gazed dumbfounded at the spectacle displayed before her.

Finally, one of the soldiers assaulting the temple found her.

The soldier approached the altar, a rugged anti-demon rifle in his hands.

Then, the rifle barrel turned toward her breast.

A moment later, a figure with a majestic golden mane came leaping in with an angry roar.

“You insoooleent—!”

The figure was a demon—a leopard-headed beast man wearing priestly vestments. He had doubtlessly arrived at the altar through fierce combat. Both of the beast man’s arms were drenched in blood spatter, and countless wounds covered his own body as well.

“Keep your hands off her, invaderrr!”

“—?!”

Noticing the beast man’s approach, the soldier instantly repositioned his rifle. However, the beast man’s attack came first. Making full use of his overwhelming physical strength, he slammed the soldier’s head into the altar wall.

His helmet shattered with an unpleasant sound.

It was a scathing attack, one that might have easily smashed the man’s skull as well. Surely no proper human being could live through that mighty blow.

Yet, heedless of this, the soldier still moved. Rather, he was laughing.

Tearing off his cracked goggles, he continued ferociously cackling with a bloodied face. Realizing this, the beast man froze. Then, with the two in close proximity, the soldier fired his rifle.

“Guoh—”

Thick blood poured out of the beast man’s mouth. With the interloper blown

all the way back to the altar, the soldier mercilessly pumped him full of bullets.

The gruesome battle spreading before her very eyes filled the girl's mind with despair. Even so, she did not move. Powerless to raise a cry, or even to avert her eyes, she was governed by fear alone.

Unable to maintain his animalistic form, the wounded beast man reverted to the stature of an old man.

No matter how great a demon's regenerative powers were, suffering such serious wounds meant death was only a matter of time. It was no longer possible for him to stand—let alone fight.

Confirming his opponent's grave state with his own eyes, the soldier slowly rose to his feet. Then he turned his gun toward the girl atop the altar once more.

“—Awaken.”

The soldier's half-broken face contorted as he uttered the strange word. The girl, still as stiff as a doll, stared at the surreal sight.

“Awaken, Zazalamagiu!”

Strength gathered in the soldier's trigger finger. The girl resigned herself to certain death.

However, the inevitable impact that filled the girl with so much fear...never came.

Without any warning, the rifle that was pointed toward the girl and the arms of the man holding it vanished completely.

“Wha—?!” the soldier blurted out in shock.

His entire body was enveloped in a golden glow.

That gleaming light was, in fact, from countless serpents with sharp fangs, entwining the man's entire body silently. By the time the soldier had noticed this, he had been completely engulfed.

The serpents, numerous beyond counting, ate him alive and then vanished.

It had all happened in an instant. Having consumed the soldier's entire body

with not even a single drop of blood remaining, they melted back into the thin air from which they had appeared.

As strength left the girl's rigid body, she fell upon the altar.

What she then heard were purposeful, dignified footsteps—and flippant laughter that was out of place.

“—Well, isn't this pathetic, monsieur chieftain. To think you would permit such brutes to tread upon holy ground. The Priests of Zazalamagiu have fallen low.”

Walking in from a temple corridor was a young man in a stark-white, three-piece suit that looked wholly unsuited for a tropical rain forest. He was a handsome blond, blue-eyed youth.

He smiled sympathetically as he looked down upon the old man in priestly attire, lying in a pool of blood.

“Dimitrie Vattler... To think we would come...to depend upon...*you*,” the old man murmured ruefully, continuing to have difficulty breathing.

The younger man forced a pained smile, shaking his head as he gazed silently at the old man.

Meanwhile, the fighting around the temple had apparently come to an end. Gunfire could no longer be heard. The scent of death that hovered in the air only seemed to grow thicker.

“...What of...them?” the old man asked, his voice breaking.

Turning his gaze to outside the temple, Vattler bluntly shook his head. “My subordinates have assumed control. However, your people protecting this holy ground were wiped out. Most unfortunate.”

“Is that so...?”

The old man coughed up a clump of blood. His life had already met its end.

With the last of his remaining strength, he weakly extended his arm and reached toward the girl on the altar—

“Please...Vattler... Take her... Take the bride with you...”

He spoke those last words in a raspy voice, just before his death.

Vattler gazed expressionless at the priest's passing.

The temple shuddered, accompanied by the sounds of explosives. They were, no doubt, exploding bombs that had been set by the soldiers.

Stone pillars collapsed as the entire temple became engulfed in fire.

Lying on her side upon the altar, the girl looked up at the face of the young, blond, blue-eyed aristocrat against the backdrop of flickering flames.

Her gaze was stolen by the beautiful, frightening sight of the young man as her voice trickled out the words:

“Dimitrie...Vattler...”



CHAPTER ONE
THE PREMONITION

CHAPTER ONE

THE PREMONITION

1

“Hey, Kojou. Isn’t that girl...?”

With Asagi Aiba calling his attention, Kojou muttered “Hmm?” and glanced over.

It was the third week of December—the last day of school before winter break.

Amid a restless, unfocused atmosphere, the boring afternoon classes had ended, and the students of Saikai Academy had begun leaving school in droves.

A single girl was standing at the school gate, apparently trying to resist the human tide.

She was an elementary schooler wearing a white, one-piece sailor suit uniform.

The school-mandated beret she wore went very well with her brightly colored, catlike hair. An adorable girl with an adult-looking face, she very much evoked a temperamental kitten.

When she caught sight of Kojou leaving school, her big eyes opened wide as she flashed a dazzling smile. Then, she waved without restraint as she broke into a little run toward Kojou and Asagi.

“Mister Kojou!”

“Yume? You were waiting for me?”

Kojou stood still in surprise.

Her name was Yume Eguchi. One week earlier, Kojou and the others had met

her at a resort called Blue Elysium. Yume was being used for the power of Lilith that she possessed, whereupon they had ended up saving her.

Ever since, Yume had become oddly attached to Kojou. The girl's behavior led Asagi to be periodically wary of her—beyond what Kojou thought necessary.

"I am sorry. Enrollment procedures were over quickly, so I had a little time on my hands... Am I being a bother?" Yume asked, mildly concerned as she pulled her beret down with one hand.

"Nah, it's not like you're bothering me, but—"

Kojou quickly shook his head, but a thin, cold sweat broke out over his brow. After all, leaving school was the only time of day when there was a large crowd by the school gates. Kojou being greeted there by an adorable elementary schooler was abnormal enough to make them *really* stand out. So, too, was the sight of Yume's admiration for Kojou, which attracted attention with incredible force.

That didn't mean he could just shoo Yume away, so Kojou could only talk around it with vague language.

Motoki Yaze, standing beside Kojou, ruffled Yume's hair as he said, "That's right, it ain't your fault at all. It's the result of Kojou's everyday actions, y'see. Well, don't worry 'bout it, li'l Yume."

Yume brushed off Yaze's hand, her cheeks puffing up in visible dismay as she put her tilted hat back in order.

"Please do not give me strange nicknames whenever you see fit. And do not touch me so casually. I find it unpleasant."

"Ghh..."

You little brat, Yaze seemed to say with a spontaneous twist of his lips.

As if to chide the girl, Asagi wedged herself between Yume and Kojou. "Enrollment procedures...? Ah, then your wearing that uniform must mean—"

"Ah yes. It is the uniform for Tensou Academy."

Yume spoke with a hint of pride on her face. Yume had no doubt come directly to Saikai Academy with the thought of showing Kojou her new uniform

straightaway.

“Tensou Academy? Isn’t that a super expensive school for elites?” Kojou exhaled in visible admiration.

Tensou Academy was a famous school located in Island West that offered elementary, middle, and high school education under one roof. There were rumors that the attending students included vampire nobility and upper-crust beast people. The others all had fine pedigrees and excellent grades. The entire campus was said to be a top-class ladies’ school.

“So it would seem. But the Gigafloat Management Corporation and the Joint Demonic Research Institute both recommended it. Thanks to the older brother of that rude person over there, everyday living concerns have also been taken care of.”

Yume bowed her head superficially to Yaze, who shouted in response, “You’re the rude one!” as he pointed at her. Kojou suspiciously turned to Yaze and stared at his friend’s face.

“Oh, right. Your older brother works at DGI, doesn’t he?” he asked, shifting his attention to Asagi.

She puffed out her chest in a little show of pride. “Yes. That’s why I told Motoki to have him make the recommendation. I figured Yume is a shoo-in for a Demon Mentorship Program scholarship.”

Kazuma, Motoki Yaze’s older brother, was a genius who’d graduated from a major North American Union university with flying colors. In spite of being midway through his twenties, he’d been assigned a crucial role in the Gigafloat Management Corporation. Asagi was acquainted with Kazuma because Motoki was her childhood friend.

Itogami Island, a Demon Sanctuary, was replete with government programs to support demons without families to care for them. The Joint Demonic Research Institute scholarship was one such program. As the World’s Mightiest Succubus, Yume, of course, met the qualifications. At the very least, she would surely be able to live a comfortable life so long as she remained on Itogami Island.

Yaze murmured in a blunt tone, “Well, that’s fine, isn’t it? His motto is to use

anything that's worth using, after all. I'm sure he'll roll out the red carpet for li'l Yume."

His expression seemed peeved somehow, like he really didn't enjoy being indebted to his biological older brother. Yume had the same look on her face from being addressed by Yaze's weird nickname. It wasn't clear to Kojou if they were getting along or not.

Kojou's shoulders wearily fell as he looked down at Yume and said, "That so...? Anyway, I'm glad. Now you can stay on Itogami Island on the up-and-up, right?"

"Yes. So please wait for me, okay?"

Yume's eyes glimmered as she looked up at Kojou. The directness and purity of her gaze somehow made Kojou feel overwhelmed.

"Huh? Wait for...what?"

"You promised, you know—that you would make me happy for the rest of my life. It is still some five years before I am old enough to marry, but...", Yume murmured, touching her left hand's ring finger and fidgeting with a blushing face.

Asagi was listening to this from right beside them; the words made her face tense.

"Wai...wait! You're wrong! I mean, you're not wrong, but that's not what I meant when I said..."

Kojou's expression turned nervous. To save Yume, who had chosen her own death to seal the soul of Lilith, the Witch of the Night—akin to a curse on her—Kojou had said he would make her happy. But Yume seemed to have taken it in a somewhat different light than Kojou had intended...

The girl was now lost in her own little world; the words with which Kojou tried to clear up the misunderstanding never reached her ears. Clenching a tiny fist in front of her chest, she stated in a strong tone:

"I do not intend to remain a child forever, so... I will do my very best!"

"You don't need to do your best! Just act normal!"

Kojou was desperately continuing to try to explain as other students leaving school—ones he didn't even know—were giving him dirty looks as they passed. Feeling the prickling of their gazes upon his back and hearing their murmurs, Kojou's pained stomach pleaded for mercy.

On top of that, Asagi, who surely knew the situation perfectly well, glared at him with half-lidded eyes. "Kojou...does this mean you really do have a thing for little girls...?!"

"How'd this turn into that?! Don't go twisting it into something it's not!"

Kojou, his eyes unwittingly tearful, shouted at Asagi. Even as a look of relief came over Asagi's face, she made no move to conceal the suspicious look in her eyes. Watching this, Yaze audibly cleared his throat and stepped between the two.



“Now, now, this isn’t really the place to talk about it, so how ’bout we go somewhere we can settle down?” he proposed.

“Ahh, well, I don’t mind, but is that fine for you, Yume? I mean, curfew, or something—”

“Yes, it is all right. I will go anywhere if it is with Mister Kojou.”

Speaking those words, Yume snuggled right into Kojou’s side. Watching that, Asagi exhibited an even graver expression.

Yaze seemed excited as he drew his face close to Kojou’s and said, “Hey, Kojou...she said she’d go with you *anywhere*. It means *anywhere’s good!*”

“Geez! Don’t go reading deep things into stuff on your own like that!”

“No, I will go! I will do my very best!”

“I said you don’t need to do that!”

Looking up at the vast blue sky above him, Kojou muttered to himself, “Gimme a break.”

At any rate, that is how winter vacation began for Kojou Akatsuki, the Fourth Primogenitor—the World’s Mightiest Vampire.

2

Itogami Island was an island of eternal summer floating smack-dab in the Pacific Ocean. Even in so-called winter, the temperatures breached 20 degrees Celsius, and the sun shining down on everyone was still intense. The trees lining the city streets were vibrant and full of leaves, sending thick shadows falling upon the sidewalks.

It was behind the trunk of one such roadside tree that a suspicious figure was concealing her presence.

This person wore a middle school uniform and carried a case for a bass guitar on her back.

Her facial features were as shapely as a doll’s, and her physique looked

delicate, but the effortless way she moved made her seem strong and supple as well. She was Yukina Himeragi, Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency.

“Oh, good grief... What does that person think he’s doing?”

Poking only her head out through a gap in the branches, Yukina murmured to herself in visible dismay.

The object of her gaze was Kojou Akatsuki on his way out of school.

Pressed right against his flank was Yume Eguchi, dressed in a brand-new school uniform. Asagi Aiba was sticking right behind them as if to keep that girl in check. A short distance away, Motoki Yaze was watching the strained relationship among the three from a safe location. Furthermore, even completely unrelated people leaving school couldn’t help looking on in interest.

Properly speaking, it was Yukina, Kojou’s observer, who ought to have been at his side. However, with all eyes upon him like this, it was difficult for her to wedge herself in. Thanks to that, Yukina could only watch in irritation.

“Even if it is Yume, how can he act so lovey-dovey with a little kid—?!”

Naturally, Yukina’s anger was directed at Kojou. Even when Yume blatantly tried to seduce him, all Yukina’s eyes could see was the Fourth Primogenitor being a doormat for an elementary school girl casually clinging to him.

Yukina’s grip grew stronger without her realizing it, causing the poor roadside tree’s branches to audibly creak.

Then, she heard a somewhat pitying voice from behind.

“Well, I’m here wondering what you think *you’re* doing, Yukina.”

The speaker was Nagisa Akatsuki, Kojou’s biological younger sister and Yukina’s classmate. Watching Yukina quietly tail Kojou, she made a pained smile mixed with a sigh.

“You know, if you have something to say to Kojou and the rest of them, you can just walk up to them and say it.”

“Y-yeah...but doing it at a time like this would be a little...”

Yukina made a frail excuse in the face of Nagisa’s exceedingly sound advice.

Of course, Yume wearing the elementary school uniform of a famous school attracted great attention—but so did Asagi’s extravagant, beautiful appearance. Furthermore, they were both making a show of fighting over Kojou. It was unthinkable that they wouldn’t stand out. If Yukina inserted herself into that, it would inevitably court even greater chaos.

As the watcher of the Fourth Primogenitor, Yukina had to strenuously avoid such behavior.

All the same, she thought it would be dangerous to simply abandon Kojou to Yume’s seductions.

With amusement, Nagisa observed Yukina, who was stricken with the mental anguish over her current dilemma, and said, “Well, I’m fine with it, really. Plus, it’s fun watching you like this, Yukina.”

“Er... Ah, I’m sorry. This is a little...”

Yukina meekly lowered her head to Nagisa, who’d ended up tagging along with her surveillance. However, Nagisa shook her head with a carefree smile on her face.

“It’s totally fine. More importantly, look! It seems as if Kojou and the others are going into Murakumo! I really like the chocolate they make with brown sugar over there. But we’ll be totally busted if we go into the same store, huh. Hey, instead of that, let’s at least buy something to drink at a corner store. What do you want, Yukina? A sports drink? Soda? Fruit juice?”

“Er... Then, ah, some kind of iced tea—”

“Okay, leave it to me!”

Still keeping her body posture low, Nagisa broke into a run to the nearest convenience store. Yukina made a weak, strained smile as she watched Nagisa go. She’d intended to become more accustomed to Nagisa’s wordiness of late, but she still found herself suddenly overwhelmed.

For their part, Kojou and the others entered the park-side café just as Nagisa had predicted. Yukina hid behind the park’s YOU ARE HERE sign and continued monitoring Kojou and the others when...

“Ah... Excuse me, you over there—miss schoolgirl?”

“Eh?”

Yukina, suddenly hearing a voice from behind, immediately turned around. Standing there was a tall, middle-aged man in a casual-looking, worn-out shirt.

His posture was rather good for his age, and his physique was honed with no hint of excess fat. However, his chin was covered with thin stubble, and an air of listlessness hovered all around him. The man was carefree, with no coercive presence whatsoever.

But that very observation threw Yukina off. The distance between them didn't even amount to three meters—close combat range, which was Yukina's specialty. The man had stepped inside that space without Yukina sensing his presence.

“Is this seat taken?” he asked, pointing at the flat bench next to the sign. He seemed to be asking out of consideration for Yukina before sitting down and taking a breather.

“Ah, no. Help yourself.”

With those words, Yukina offered the bench to the man. His lack of an aura threw her off, but she could sense no hostile intent from the man. If anything, Yukina's sneaking around was the more suspicious action between them.

“Thanks. Ahh, that's a big help. It's tough wanderin' around in this crappy heat when you get to be my age...”

The man settled down on the bench, flicking up the rim of the old-fashioned fedora hat he wore. Yukina felt an odd sense of déjà vu when she saw his now-exposed face. He should have been a simple passerby, but she didn't think this was their first meeting. He greatly resembled someone Yukina knew.

“So you're not sitting down, miss schoolgirl?” he asked without any amount of tension—a complete contrast to Yukina's bewilderment.

“Correct,” said Yukina, nodding with a stiff expression. “I am all right. Please pay no heed.”

“Hmm. Incidentally, that case...the one on your back. What's in it?”

The man casually rested his chin on a hand as he asked another question. Thanks to his casual manner of speech, Yukina couldn't find the right moment to brush the question away.

Yukina awkwardly shifted a hand to the gig bag on her back and said, "Th-this is a musical instrument. Er...what they call a bass guitar."

"Heh...bass, huh? Do you like music, miss schoolgirl? What genre?"

The man bit on the topic with unexpected fervor.

Yukina felt a cold sweat on her back. Naturally, it was not a bass guitar or the like in the case on her back. In truth, it was the Lion King Agency's Schneewaltzer—a purging spear, dubbed Snowdrift Wolf.

"E-er... I, ah, haven't really kept up with musical trends of late..."

That was all Yukina could manage to say as she tried to somehow conceal her inner nervousness.

The man laughed in delight, smiling as he said, "Nice answer there. I suppose the youngins are into punk these days, huh?"

Even as Yukina wondered what *puncture* had to do with music, she made an appropriate sound and nod of agreement. The man in the fedora hat nodded twice, crossing his arms in apparent satisfaction.

"Ahh, good stuff," he said. "I was really into music when I was your age, going to live concerts and all that. Don't mind me. It just distracted me for a moment."

"Is that so? Have you...come to enjoy...punk?"

Yukina asked a question to prevent the man from prying into the object in her case any further. Though she would have liked to flee without a moment to lose, she couldn't leave that place until Nagisa returned from her trip to the convenience store. Until then, she had no choice but to somehow put up with the middle-aged man's chummy ways.

Whether he knew what Yukina was up to or not, the man fondly narrowed his eyes and said, "Ahh, I'm into those underground idols. Like, the Gristle Fairy Hoods or Aromatic Megaterium. Do you know them? Maybe you don't."

“I—I am sorry.”

Yukina apologized for no clear reason. Internally, she was seriously conflicted about whether these were really the names of idol groups.

Taking advantage of the momentary lapse in Yukina’s thoughts, the man slipped in a question.

“Incidentally, miss schoolgirl—what’s your relationship to Kojou Akatsuki?”

“Eh?!”

Yukina let out a little voice. *Oh no*, she thought, but it was too late. There was no longer any way to gloss things over. The man clearly knew she was monitoring Kojou.

“Wh-why do you know Akatsuki-senpai’s name...?!” Yukina exclaimed, her voice going shrill.

A leering smile came over the man, playing innocent as he said, “Well, I mean, you’ve been glaring at Kojou with an incredible look all this time, miss schoolgirl. I thought maybe it was envy...or rather, jealousy. Am I right?”

“You are not!”

Yukina glared at the man, confused as to why he’d go out of his way to “correct” himself like that.

“I—I am simply observing Akatsuki-senpai. It is not j-jealousy or anything of the sort!”

“Observing? Observing, you say. In other words, stalking the object of your unrequited love?” He chuckled to himself in apparent admiration.

Yukina momentarily froze at his unexpected reaction before blurting out, “E-excuse me?! ”

“‘Observing,’ so nice. Ahh, the springtime of youth. Ack, it’s so innocent, so... bittersweeeeet!”

“H-how did the conversation come to this?! More importantly, who are you...?!”

Yukina, her face red to her ears, pressed the man for answers. That was when

she sensed someone standing right behind them.

“G-Gajou?!”

Nagisa was carrying PET bottles when she looked at the middle-aged man in the fedora hat—her eyes going wide. It was the sort of expression players made when encountering a super-rare monster in an online video game.

“Ga...jou?” Yukina gasped at her friend’s murmur. She finally had confirmation on the man’s identity.

“Oh, Nagisa! How you been?”

The man in the fedora hat rose to his feet with a grandiose spread of his arms as he beamed at her, smiling. The sudden transformation left Yukina shocked that human beings were capable of such love-struck expressions.

“You’re as adorable as ever! You’d think you’re some kind of goddess! Ahh, I saw you run off to the convenience store, so I thought I’d introduce myself to miss schoolgirl here while I was waiting around.”

“Ah, so that’s it... Incidentally, what are you doing here, Gajou? When did you get back to Japan? What about work? Have you met Mimori yet? What’d you talk to Yukina about?”

Nagisa casually parried the man’s exaggerated flattery like she was accustomed to it. For some reason, Nagisa’s rapid-fire questions made him proudly raise his chin as he answered:

“I basically just arrived on Itogami Island. I went on a ruins excavation in the Caribbean, but a civil war suddenly broke out, y’see. Ha-ha, that was a pain. I went to see Mimori at work, but she said I was in the way and kicked me out, and since then, I’ve been talking to miss schoolgirl here about romance.”

“Talking about romance?!” Nagisa stared at Yukina with a starry look in her eyes and said, “No fair.”

Yukina desperately shook her head as she retorted, “W-we did not...!”

“Ah, that’s right. I haven’t introduced myself yet, have I...? Oh?”

Then the man, the architect of that false accusation, suddenly raised a hand for reasons only apparent to him.

He was staring at a chair on the terrace of the park-side café. There, being seated after ordering, were Kojou and the others with him. Yukina was nervous about the group realizing she'd tailed them, but the man waved to them right out in the open and said:

"Hey, Kojou. Over here!"

"Geh, Dad...?! What are you doing here, you old geezer?!"

Kojou, noticing the man's presence, spat the insult as an involuntary reflex.

Hearing Kojou's words, Yukina was dumbfounded as she compared the faces of the pair.

It was Kojou Akatsuki, none other than the target Yukina watched over, whom the middle-aged man in the fedora hat greatly resembled—not only in their faces but in their gestures and the listless air about them.

"Y-you are...Akatsuki-senpai's...father...?" Yukina's voice conveyed some doubts.

Now she could understand the reason for Nagisa's surprise. They didn't know why they were encountering such an individual at this time.

Then, the man gazed at the petrified Yukina with apparent amusement as he made an impetuous smile, his intonation somehow seeming suspicious as he said:

"Gajou Akatsuki. Kojou and Nagisa's father. Nice to meet ya!"

3

"My, my, to think you'd lay a hand even on a little girl just because you can't land a woman—"

Lying on the living room sofa, Gajou Akatsuki shook his shoulders as he laughed.

They were in the Akatsuki family's own apartment. It had actually been a year and several months since Gajou had last returned. Thanks to that, the atmosphere in the room seemed to revolve around him alone.

“I didn’t lay a hand on her! That’s just Yume misunderstanding a bunch of things!” Kojou insisted, making a sullen face like a sulking child.

It hadn’t even been thirty minutes since Kojou and the others had encountered Gajou Akatsuki in the park. However, as soon as Kojou saw his father’s face, he decided to return home immediately. He was fearful of Gajou coming into contact with his friends. Even setting Yaze and Asagi aside, the real danger lay with Yume. If he carelessly let those two meet, there was no telling what ideas Gajou might put into her head.

However, by the time Gajou raised his voice to Kojou and the others, he’d apparently already finished gathering all kinds of information, not only about his connection to Yume but all kinds of other blackmail material to tease Kojou, which accounted for the disheartened look that overcame Kojou.

“...Misunderstanding, you say.” Gajou slurped on the delicious-looking soba noodles Nagisa had brought him and gave a suggestive smile. “Well, don’t worry about it. I mean, Mimori and I are over ten years apart. Even if they call you a criminal, just put up with it for a decade and it’s cool.”

“Who’s a criminal...?! And you shut up—you’re making this more complicated!”

Kojou’s lips twisted in annoyance at his father’s off-the-wall consolation. However, Gajou paid no heed to his son’s objections, shifting an amiable gaze toward Yukina.

For some reason, Gajou seemed to have taken a liking to Yukina. He’d overruled her polite refusal, insisting she join them at their residence.

“Incidentally, Himeragi, was it? Sorry for earlier. I said all sorts of rude things, like jealousy, stalking, and so on.”

“N-not at all. I did not mind, so please.”

Yukina looked a little tense as she shook her head at Gajou’s words.

“What the hell were you saying to a girl you just met?” Kojou complained, clutching his head.

Even so, Gajou displayed not even a single smidgen of remorse as he warmly

patted Kojou's shoulder and said, "I really am sorry. I didn't think an idiot like this would have a girlfriend as cute as you."

"Eh?!"

Yukina stiffened, unable to react to Gajou's brazen remark. Kojou was just as frozen. Gajou, off on his own, seemed in high spirits.

"I really have to say, though, what do you see in a guy like Kojou?" Gajou asked, narrowing his eyes. "A pretty girl like you should have any number of better choices to pick from—"

"Hey, Himeragi's not my girlfriend! Lay off with the stupid delusions, you old fart!"

Kojou yelled right back at his father. Gajou continued sipping soba noodles, pretending not to hear a word.

"D-delusions..." Yukina, hearing Kojou's statement, narrowed the corners of her eyes in a grimace.

However, Kojou did not notice the change in Yukina as he said, "Himeragi's just my junior at school. She coincidentally lives next door to us. You didn't know because you haven't been back here!"

"Hmm. Just your junior, huh..."

A leering grin came over Gajou as he crossed his legs. He shooed away Kojou, glaring at him at point-blank range, like an annoyance as he said:

"Incidentally, Himeragi, have you done it with Kojou yet?"

"Eh?!"

"Listen to what people are saying, dammit—!"

Already on a short string, Kojou snapped and launched a mighty right hook straight at his father's face. It was an attack largely bereft of restraint. With a solid hit, Gajou's skull would shatter.

However, Gajou evaded his son's attack, launched with the raw strength of a vampire, with room to spare.

"Whoa now... Scary, scary. That was a close one."

“You middle-aged perv—!”

Even with his body heavily off-balance, Kojou launched a string of left jabs. Gajou’s movements made the powerful string of attacks flail fruitlessly in the air.

In spite of that, Gajou’s lips curled up in a minor show of admiration.

“Huh... I leave for a little while and your attacks get a lot sharper, don’t they? That’s my son for ya. Well, still got a long way to go, though.”

“Wha—?!”

Yukina had a delayed reaction, utterly shocked by Gajou’s unexpected dodges. At some point during the scuffle, Gajou had gotten ahold of the bottle of tabasco sauce, supposedly at the far corner of the table. Then, Gajou blindsided Kojou, giving his son a hearty face full of the bottle’s contents. The timing was so calculated that even his vampiric reaction speed could not fully evade the flying liquid.

Kojou, taking tabasco straight to the eyes, could only writhe helplessly.

“Guoooooh... My eyes, my eyes...!”

“S-senpai...?! ”

Yukina swiftly rose to her feet and rushed to Kojou, towel in hand. Taking deep interest, Gajou silently watched Yukina valiantly beginning to tend to Kojou.

“Wait a—?! Kojou, Gajou, what do you think you’re doing?!”

Nagisa, rushing over from the kitchen, gawked as she looked at the pathetic state of the room, with tabasco sauce scattered all over it.

Kojou rubbed his inflamed eyes as he unsteadily sat up and yelled, “Shiiit... What the hell did you come over here for anyway?! Normally, you won’t come back even if we ask!!”

“I said, I’m here to pick up Nagisa.”

After stating that, Gajou plopped his hand onto his daughter’s head. It remained there as Nagisa looked up at her father, cheeks puffing up in an

obvious sulk.

“Sheesh, if you’re going to come, say so sooner. I have all kinds of plans, after all. Now I have to buy food to cover you, too.”

“...Where do you plan on taking Nagisa?”

Kojou, having somehow regained his vision, glared up at Gajou as he asked the question in a low voice.

To date, Gajou had used Nagisa in his own work a number of times. Previously, Nagisa had been wrapped up in an incident for which Gajou was the underlying cause.

Naturally, Nagisa’s hospitalization had diminished his high-handedness, but that didn’t mean Kojou could be careless. He had reasons to be wary of his father.

However, Gajou gazed with exasperation at the naked antagonism on his own son’s face and said, “Hey, think of the season for a minute. It’s for homecoming.”

“...Homecoming?”

Kojou fell silent, feeling like Gajou’s unexpected words were somehow dodging the question.

Certainly, the end of the old year and the start of the new was cause for celebration all over the world. On Itogami Island, far removed from the mainland, the homecoming rush had to have already begun in earnest.

“It’ll be New Year’s soon. Your granny back in Tanzawa’s vocal about us going back once in a while. We couldn’t do it last year with Nagisa still in the hospital and all. The flight’s first thing tomorrow morning.”

“What the hell...? That’s out of the blue. I’m not ready at all,” Kojou complained with a sour look on his face.

Gajou’s mother—in other words, Kojou and Nagisa’s grandmother—was a resident of Kansai. She worked as a priestess in a little shrine deep in the Tanzawa Mountains. He wasn’t unhappy at the prospect of going to see her, but he couldn’t shake the impression that the visit was abrupt. However—

“Huh? Who said you’re coming?” Gajou replied, casually brushing off his own son’s objections. “It’s just me and Nagisa going back. Mimori doesn’t exactly get along with Granny, you know.”

“Just Nagisa?!”

“Of course. What do you think a plane ticket to the mainland costs at this time of year? It’s not cheap to get a permit to leave Itogami Island, either.”

“G-gnnn...”

Gajou’s pragmatic explanation left Kojou at a loss of words to refute him.

Flights in and out of the airport were restricted, and transit costs were high for flights from Itogami Island to the mainland—made all the worse by the busy season. On top of that, since it was a Demon Sanctuary, annoying paperwork was required to leave or enter Itogami Island, and the commission fees required served as an additional expense. Gajou’s point was entirely valid.

“Besides, there’s a reason for bringing Nagisa back with me. I figured I’d have Granny give her a purification rite. It’s best to have her carefully look over Nagisa to see why she lost her spiritual powers, right?”

“Y-yeah... Yeah, I suppose.”

Kojou grudgingly accepted his father’s words. Though virtually unknown beyond Kojou, Gajou, and other family, Nagisa was once a powerful spiritualist—in the top five nationally.

Nagisa lost her spiritual powers in a demon-instigated incident some four years earlier. Somehow, they’d managed to heal her wounds from the incident, and Nagisa had come out of the hospital safe and sound, but her powers had remained lost for reasons that were still unclear. Nagisa herself paid no attention to the fact she’d lost that ability, but on the other hand, she was afflicted by poor health from time to time for reasons unknown. Kojou, too, supported having a trustworthy spiritualist give Nagisa a look.

In a tiny voice, Yukina whispered into Kojou’s ear, “Senpai, please wait. If you seriously want Nagisa checked, the Lion King Agency would be a better—”

Her expression was unusually serious. Yukina, an exceedingly gifted

spiritualist herself, knew the dangers of exorcism well. She was concerned that an amateur trying her hand might have negative effects on Nagisa.

“Ahh, nah, I think it’s probably fine. I’m glad you’re concerned, but I told you before, right? Our granny’s an unregistered Attack Mage. She’s used to this kind of work.”

“...Then that might mean all the more danger. I have an ill premonition. If I am not mistaken, what is possessing Nagisa might be senpai’s—”

“Mm? Something with Kojou’s what?” Gajou butted into the conversation, forcing himself between Yukina’s words.

“Um,” Yukina said, surprised into silence.

Even so, Gajou insistently peered into Yukina’s face. “What, what? Won’t you let me in on it, too?”

“E-er... No, I am sorry. It is nothing.”

Kojou grabbed the back of Gajou’s neck to stop him from backing Yukina further into a corner. “Quit it already,” he snapped, to which Gajou clicked his tongue, his shoulders sinking in visible disappointment.

“Well, no need to worry. Setting aside the strength of Grandma’s own Spirit Sight, it’s New Year’s. The apprentices will probably come to play, too. Maybe that baldy Tokimikado, maybe Pops Shidosawa...”

“I-Instructor Tokimikado...?! And Chairman Shidosawa?” Yukina’s expression stiffened the moment she heard both names.

“You know them?” Kojou asked in a dubious tone.

Yukina hurriedly shook her head and said, “The former chief instructor of the Lion King Agency and the chairman of the Attack Mage Association. They are men far beyond my station for me to have met them, but—”

“Huh... So those old guys are big shots, then?” Kojou murmured in admiration.

Yukina could only nod in amazement. However, her unease over Nagisa’s exorcism had apparently been assuaged. With people of such competence close at hand, even Yukina could not summon any reason to object to the rite.

Gajou gazed at the exchange between Kojou and Yukina, looking like something didn't quite sit right with him. Then, with some object in mind, he suddenly leaned forward, staring straight into Yukina's face.

"Incidentally, Himeragi. I have something serious to discuss with you—"

"Y-yes?" Overwhelmed by the serious look coming from Gajou, Yukina subconsciously straightened her posture.

That instant, Gajou broke into a leering gaze and said, "I want to see the faces of my grandchildren sooner rather than later. Maybe a girl, if you can swing it —"

"Pardon?"

With Yukina frozen in place, unable to comprehend the meaning of the words, something came rushing over from right beside her with the force of a cannonball. Kojou had hurled a cushion at his father's face full-on. *Thud*, went the cushion, connecting squarely, sending the wide-open Gajou reeling back.

"...That's dangerous, brat. Don't raise a hand against your own father," Gajou casually objected as he rubbed his reddened forehead.

Kojou followed up with a leaping kick at his complacent father.

"Shut up, you middle-aged lecher! I'll kill you!" Kojou yelled.

"It's ten years too soon for you to pull that off."

Gajou calmly sidestepped his own son's kick and proceeded to give Kojou's ankle a very hard twist. Overcome with terrible pain, Kojou fell helplessly to the floor.

"Ow, ow, ow, ow!"

"Wait a...?! Kojou, Gajou, what are you doing?!"

Noticing the sudden, violent exchange between the two men, Nagisa hurried to put a stop to it.

"Th...this is senpai's...father..."

Yukina could only manage a frail murmur to herself, still half-frozen and overwhelmed by the spectacle.

The next day—

In the early morning, Kojou Akatsuki, dressed in street clothes, let out a heavy yawn at Itogami Island's central airport.

The time was just before seven AM, the harshest time of day for a nocturnal vampire.

Naturally, he'd gone all the way to the airport in that state to see Nagisa off, as she was heading for the mainland on an early morning flight, and to keep an eye on his untrustworthy father.

The sun was peeking over the water's horizon, shining dazzlingly upon the glass-covered airport lobby. Even at that hour, Itogami Island was hot.

"Well, we're headin' off for a little while. Get along nice with Himeragi, 'kay?"

"Oh, shut up and get going already."

Gajou, wearing a vibrant trench coat, spoke to his son in a half-frigid tone. Kojou glared sullenly back at his father in kind.

The flight was scheduled to depart in less than an hour. Considering the troublesome customs inspections peculiar to Demon Sanctuaries, it was right about time to head over to the baggage inspection gate.

Nagisa exchanged a warm and cordial good-bye with Yukina, who'd gone with Kojou to see them off.

"Do watch out. It seems to be cold on the mainland, after all," Yukina said, concerned.

In her arms, Nagisa clutched a large number of souvenirs for her grandmother. Yukina owed the exhausted expression on her face to joining Nagisa from one airport shop to the next as she picked out those souvenirs.

"Thanks," said Nagisa with a cheery smile. "I'm more worried about you, Yukina. I hope Kojou doesn't cause you too much trouble."

"Mm, I'll be all right. Don't worry, I'll keep a close watch on senpai and make

sure he doesn't bother Aiba and Yume," Yukina answered in a strong, determined tone.

Kojou Akatsuki, the Fourth Primogenitor, was a vampire who became acquainted with unfamiliar girls, drinking their blood and risking his life for them the moment Yukina let him out of her sight. She had made a heartfelt pledge to redouble her observation efforts.

However, seeing Yukina's zeal only made Nagisa's concern deepen.

"...You know, Yukina. Have you heard the phrase *Those who hunt for mummies become mummies themselves?*"

"Um, er, yes...?"

Why is she saying that to me? thought Yukina, somewhat perplexed. Nagisa, watching Yukina's oblivious reaction, sighed in apparent resignation.

An announcement came over the airport lobby for passengers to proceed to baggage inspection.

"Well, we're off. See you soon! Don't spoil Kojou too much, Yukina. And don't either of you try to force any funny business!"

"I—I will not spoil him!"

"Like hell she will!"

With flustered, spontaneous retorts, Kojou and Yukina saw Nagisa and Gajou off to the security gate.

When the boisterous father and daughter were out of sight, the airport's atmosphere suddenly seemed far quieter around them.

"Sheesh. Sorry to drag you out for this so early in the morning, Himeragi," Kojou said, listlessly stretching his back.

Yukina shook her head with her usual overly serious look and replied, "Not at all, senpai. It is my duty to watch over you."

"Well, that might be the case, but it seems like my dad teased you pretty hard about stuff."

"I suppose so... No matter how you look at it, him making it seem like I am

your girlfriend is a little, ah..."

Yukina looked down a bit with a light flush to her cheeks, almost like she was blushing. But Kojou, for his part, clicked his tongue a little, deeply annoyed.

"His jokes haven't been funny since way back. This one's way too stupid."

"A joke? ...I see... Stupid, you say..."

Light vanished from Yukina's eyes as her expression became dark and cold. Kojou, not noticing the change in Yukina, smiled brightly.

"Sorry that he put you through all that. When he gets back, I'll drill into his thick skull that you're not my girlfriend, so forgive him for this time, 'kay?"

"Is that so? I understand very well now."

"Ah, what?"

"I am sorry that my being only your junior rather than your girlfriend has caused you such annoyance."

"Ah, er. Himeragi...?"

Yukina suddenly hastened her pace, leaving Kojou in her dust and making him catch up in a hurry.

"By any chance, are you...angry?"

"No, not at all."

Yukina stopped in place and shot Kojou a look that somehow seemed resentful. Of course, Kojou had no clue what had brought it on. *Maybe she really hated how Gajou poured cold water on everything*, he thought, almost like it was someone else's problem.

"Anyway, maybe I'm just imagining this, but it seems like everyone's on edge today."

"I said I am not angry."

"No, not you, Himeragi. Look at those airport security guys."

"Eh...?"

Hearing Kojou's murmur, Yukina finally stopped walking altogether.

Kojou had actually noticed a difference in the security right after arriving at the airport. Yukina had probably taken note of it, too.

The number of airport staff watching the departure gate and the airport entrance was well above the norm. Their expressions and actions gave off an air of strict vigilance.

“I...see. Perhaps *that* might be the cause...”

Yukina pointed toward a large television placed in the airport’s waiting area. There was a grainy satellite image being displayed on the TV screen. The image was from overseas news footage with no Japanese text apparent. It was the scene of some overseas city he didn’t recognize; Kojou could see damaged buildings and people injured by bombs and shells.

“What is that...? A war?”

Standing beside Kojou, Yukina replied, “Yes,” nodding with a grave look.

Having received a specialized education from the Lion King Agency, Yukina’s scholastics were already up to a high school graduate level. Apparently, she could easily read English at the degree used in a typical news broadcast.

“It seems that a civil war has broken out in the Chaos Zone. Apparently, a military unit deployed near the Confederate States of America launched an armed uprising and is demanding its own autonomous region.”

“The Chaos Zone...?” Kojou’s brows rose as he recognized the region’s name. “That’s the country of that Giada woman, right?”

“Yes. It is the Dominion in Central America, ruled by the Third Primogenitor, the Chaos Bride.”

“...Oh yeah? ...I’m kinda surprised, somehow.”

Kojou murmured to himself as he recalled the sight of the beautiful, emerald-haired, jade-eyed vampiress.

Kojou had encountered Giada Kukulkin, one of the three publicly recognized primogenitors, only a month earlier. She oozed off-the-charts combat capability and exceptional charisma.

“Surprised?”

“Yeah. I mean, if there’s a revolt, doesn’t that mean her people are unhappy with her somehow? Or is she what you’d call, well, a tyrant?” Kojou said, tilting his head. “It didn’t look that way to me.”

The Third Primogenitor whom Kojou had met came with overwhelming power and majesty befitting the title, but she didn’t seem like an unreasonable individual. If anything, she felt like a very humanlike vampiress, coming off as calculating but playful. The charming personality she’d displayed shouldn’t have been that far off the mark.

“No, certainly the primogenitors rule the Dominions in name, but they do not directly govern their nations. There are elected legislatures and qualified bureaucrats, and besides, the First and Second Primogenitors have not appeared before their populaces in decades.”

“Really?”

Kojou felt even more mystified. But now that he thought of it, he didn’t know what the First or Second Primogenitors looked like. He didn’t even remember seeing photographs of them.

“Among them, only the Chaos Bride is known to ordinarily prowl ab—er, travel around her Dominion, observing her people and speaking to them about their concerns, so she should enjoy zealous support from the population. Nor should law and order or the domestic economy be in a poor state. It seems all this places considerable stress on those tasked with watching her, but...,” Yukina politely explained, even letting her own private thoughts slip in midway.

“I see,” said Kojou in agreement. Apparently, his first impression of Giada wasn’t that far off after all. That made the current state of the Chaos Zone all that more suspicious.

“So why’s there a revolt, then?”

“That is probably—,” Yukina began, but her words suddenly stopped when she seemed to notice something. Kojou, following her surprised gaze, blithely turned his head around.

In that direction was a corridor leading from the arrival lobby to the airport’s central entrance. Furthermore, standing there was a silver-haired man wearing

a demon registration bracelet on his left arm. He was handsome and young, his demeanor evoking a cold, edged weapon. He was also someone Kojou knew quite well—and was on his list of individuals he never wanted to meet again.

“Huh?! You’re—”

“Senpai, stand back!”

Yukina advanced to the fore, as if to shield the shocked Kojou. She reached a hand toward the guitar case on her back, poised to draw her spear out at any moment.

The silver-haired youth gazed at Kojou’s and Yukina’s reactions with a scornful sigh.

“Oh, it’s you, Kojou Akatsuki. Just like you to be fondling a little girl’s butt.”

He spoke in a challenging tone. Hearing this, Kojou and Yukina barked back at the same time.

“I ain’t fondling her!”

“He is not fondling me!”

Seeing the two in perfect sync, the silver-haired youth exhaled and laughed indifferently. As he did so, Kojou glared at him with naked animosity.

“You’re the vampire on Vattler’s ship, Kira’s partner—”

“Tobias Jagan! Remember it already!”

This time, it was the blond youth’s turn to make an angry retort.

Tobias Jagan was an aristocrat born in the Warlord’s Empire in Western Europe. He was an Old Guard vampire, a direct descendant of the First Primogenitor, the Lost Warlord.

He resided on Itogami Island as a confidant to Dimitrie Vattler, Duke of Ardeal and also Warlord’s Empire nobility, but his position was closer to an enemy of Kojou’s. Furthermore, for some reason, he acted like he hated Kojou for personal reasons. At any rate, he wasn’t a vampire to take lightly.

Kojou, glaring at Jagan across Yukina’s shoulder, yelled, “What the hell are you doing here?!”

Jagan snorted in visible scorn. “I am under no obligation to answer questions from you, fool.”

“Oh yeah?!”

Indignant, Kojou closed the distance with Jagan. Yukina hastily held the angry Kojou back.

“Senpai, please calm down a little!”

“...You’re in the arrival lobby... So you’re here waiting for someone?” Kojou asked.

“Well, well...” went Jagan at Kojou’s unexpectedly calm observation. He wore an expression seemingly wary of Kojou’s sharp eyes. “Hmph. So even you possess intelligence equal to a kindergartener’s... Color me impressed.”

“Well, don’t be!”

Jagan’s tone, as if expressing heartfelt admiration, only irritated Kojou further. However, it seemed Jagan was not in any mood to humor Kojou.

“Begone, pest.”

Pushing past Kojou and Yukina, who were obstructing his path, Jagan walked straight down the corridor. But as if remembering something, he stopped, looked back, and opened his mouth with a grudging expression. With emotion and reason in conflict, reason seemed to have barely won out.

“Listen up, Kojou Akatsuki. My business does not include unproductive combat with you. Nor is it of direct import with this island.”

“Huh?”

“So don’t bother worrying and carry on...until His Excellency returns at least!”

With that one-sided statement, he ignored Kojou and Yukina and walked off, that time for good.

“What’s with him?” Kojou muttered, shrugging his shoulders as he glared at the departing man’s back. “*His Excellency* means Vattler, right? What does he mean, until the guy’s back?”

“I do not know... However, he spoke as if the Duke of Ardeal is not on Itogami

Island...”

Yukina closed her eyes and quietly sank into thought. Then, lifting her face as if remembering something, she ran outside the building. Kojou, having no idea what was going on, chased after her.

She headed to an open space inside the airport with a view overlooking the sea.

“Senpai, look there.”

As Yukina spoke, she pointed to a pier in the harbor district. Built alongside the central airport, the giant international passenger ship terminal served with the airport as the entrance to Itogami Island, twin symbols for the man-made island’s eastern district. That very moment, numerous cruise ships were moored there.

Even among such company, the *Oceanus Grave II*, the mega-yacht owned by Dimitrie Vattler, stood out. The privately owned vessel was an ocean liner of such stature that it rivaled a naval destroyer in size.

However, at the moment, that majestic floating castle was nowhere to be seen. The utterly unmistakable sight of the huge ship had vanished from Itogami Harbor.

The *Oceanus Grave II* had departed without either Kojou or Yukina realizing it. Where had it sailed off to and its owner, Vattler, with it...?

“Vattler’s ship is...gone?” Kojou murmured, dumbfounded.

The civil war in the Chaos Zone, Jagan’s mysterious behavior—that series of ill portents made Kojou, who would normally be glad for Vattler’s absence, all the more concerned. The timing seemed especially poor.

That said, Kojou possessed no means of discerning Vattler’s true intent.

“...”

He and Yukina, standing beside him, held each other’s gaze, the two seemingly sharing a sigh. Apparently, Kojou and Yukina were fated to be led around by Vattler even when he was nowhere to be found.

In the end, Kojou and Yukina arrived back at their apartment building close to ten AM. They'd spent the excess time searching for Jagan at the airport to check on the whereabouts of the *Oceanus Grave II*, absent from its pier.

However, in the end, they were unable to gain any leads on Vattler's location. Even checking the Net—and with the Lion King Agency—had yielded no details. As a result, Kojou and Yukina had spent all that time for naught.

And back in the present—

Kojou was staring at Yukina, wielding a rugged combat knife in the Akatsuki residence kitchen, with a dubious look on his face.

"I shall handle this. Senpai, please go on ahead—"

With those words, Yukina violently swung down with the knife.

The polished blade sank deeply into the mass of meat, severing it without a sound.

"No way. I can't leave this to you all by yourself, Himeragi!" Kojou earnestly attempted to stop her.

Kojou's right hand was gripping a sharp blade in its own right—a stainless steel, multipurpose chef's knife.

"Why can you not entrust this to me?!"

For once, Yukina glared at Kojou with visible emotion on her face. Right beside her was a metallic-colored, two-handed pot, making a soft sound as it simmered over a gas-burner flame.

"Well, what exactly do you plan to do with that mayonnaise in your hand?!"

"Th-this is to add flavor!"

Yukina, dressed in an apron, hid the mayonnaise in her hand behind her back as her shoulders shuddered a little.

With a practiced hand, Kojou lightly peeled daikon radishes as he insisted, "No, that's not right! This is meat we're talking about!"

“Mayonnaise has many nutritional benefits. After all, there are cases of stranded mountain climbers having survived hunger thanks to licking the mayonnaise they had on hand!”

“That hypothetical situation’s got nothing to do with this!”

Having tried and failed to desperately explain it away, Yukina grudgingly put the condiment down. Seeing this, Kojou audibly exhaled in relief.

The time was 12:40 PM. They were preparing a slightly late lunch.

With Nagisa absent for the time being, Kojou had meant to stock up on grub and convenience store bento boxes, but Yukina had voiced opposition to this. She claimed ready-made food was lacking in nutrition; apparently, with Nagisa gone, Yukina had taken on responsibility for Kojou’s dietary regimen herself.

Of course, Kojou had little objection to home cooking per se, but—

“That doesn’t mean you need to force yourself to help me, Himeragi. Lately, Nagisa’s been taking care of it, but I was cooking for myself a lot during middle school.”

“No, I can cook, too. I received survival training from the Lion King Agency, after all.” She proudly added, “Leave it to me.”

Apparently, that very training was the culprit behind her waving around a combat knife in place of a chef’s.

“Oh, fine, then. Setting aside flavoring the meat, go ahead and set the sashimi, Himeragi.”

“Understood. Well, then...”

With one hand, Yukina received the plate Kojou offered her as she set the combat knife down. For a moment, Kojou doubted his own eyes when he saw what she had picked up in its place.

“Wait a sec! Why are you picking up the mayo now...?!”

“...Are you saying that ketchup would be better?”

“This ain’t sunny-side up eggs, so cut both out! At least don’t put any on my por—”

“Tee-hee, I am kidding. I am not so bereft of taste for that.” Seeing Kojou seriously nervous sent Yukina giggling with a teasing smile.

“...Gimme a break.” Kojou weakly exhaled, drained of strength. As usual, he couldn’t put his finger on Yukina’s sense of humor.

Yukina focused on earnestly setting the plates for a while, perhaps thinking she’d gone just a trifle too far. Kojou silently peeled the daikon radishes in the meantime.

With calm returning to the kitchen, the only sounds were of boiling meat and the two performing their respective tasks. It was that serenity, with both in close, crowded quarters, that suddenly made each of them conscious of their situation.

For some reason, Yukina’s tone was awkward as she commented, “Y-you know, it’s very quiet without Nagisa around.”

Perhaps she was trying to ease the tension in her own way. However, thanks to her saying *Nagisa isn’t here*, that fact came into even sharper relief in both of their minds. Yes—Nagisa would not be returning home that day. They were alone with each other till nightfall.

Stay frosty, Kojou told himself.

There ought not to have been anything odd about being alone with Yukina; she was the watcher of the Fourth Primogenitor. It was her duty to be at his side like that.

Kojou had no reason to be tense. The fact that he had Yukina on his mind more than usual was, in his opinion, Gajou’s fault for having run his mouth the day before about wanting to see the faces of his grandkids.

“Geez, kids, my ass. That moron...”

Kojou subconsciously murmured it to himself. Yukina shuddered, her body going rigid in apparent fright as she said:

“K-kids...?”

“Er, n-nope! I definitely didn’t say that! I meant...eggs! We’ve got some eggs left in the fridge, so I was thinking, best to use ’em up ASAP.”

“I—I see.” Yukina’s smiling face was tense as she nodded.

He seemed to have lowered her guard a bit, but the uncomfortable, awkward atmosphere still remained. The more he noticed the awkwardness, the more nervous he became.

“Ah, sorry.”

When Kojou went to take the same napkin Yukina was reaching for, his fingertips brushed her hand. Both Kojou and Yukina stopped moving with their hands remaining overlapped.

“I—I am sorry!”

“No, my bad.”

Kojou and Yukina forced their frozen bodies to move, pulling their hands away. It was one brief moment, but it had felt unusually long. The silence that assailed them once more felt heavy.

“H-how about we turn on the TV?”

“L-let us do that.”

Unable to endure the serenity, both spoke to that effect as they shifted to the living room. It just so happened that the first channel to be displayed was airing the same overseas news service they’d seen at the airport.

“Civil war, huh...”

Setting his eyes upon that cruel reality made Kojou finally feel like his head had cooled off.

Even if the events were taking place in a far-off nation, it was a war involving a fellow vampire primogenitor. Kojou couldn’t manage to feel like it didn’t concern him.

Apparently, the silver lining was that the civil war had yet to escalate into a fully-fledged armed conflict. There had yet to be reports of civilian fatalities.

“Come to think of it, we were talking about this before, but why are they rebelling anyway?”

Kojou continued watching the screen as he posed the question. Yukina had

been on the verge of divulging the information back at the airport.

“It is probably...a border dispute, but...”

“...Border dispute?”

“Yes. Besides the Chaos Zone, the continent of North America contains two large nations, the Confederate States of America and the North American Union. It is the CSA that directly borders the Chaos Zone, however.”

“Ahh... Come to think of it, I think we had a geography lesson on that.”

Kojou vaguely remembered the countries on a world map. The NAU was composed of everything from Alaska to the Great Lakes region, and the interior of the continent was covered by the CSA. From there, the southern part of North America and the Caribbean Sea were governed by the Chaos Zone—such were the three major countries comprising most of North America.

“It is said that the border between the Chaos Zone and the CSA is a vast treasure trove of mineral wealth. Accordingly, there have been repeated disputes between the two nations over the border territories belonging to them. However, because it has the NAU at its back, the CSA cannot engage in large-scale hostilities.”

“Meaning it’s bad if they got trapped in a pincer, huh?”

Kojou understood the gist of Yukina’s explanation. The powerful NAU was lurking behind the CSA’s back. Depleting itself in a conflict with the Chaos Zone would only be to the CSA’s disadvantage.

“Yes. Therefore, I believe the CSA has instigated rebellious elements within the Chaos Zone. No matter how great the Chaos Bride’s popularity, there are still beast-men supremacists chafing under the rule of vampires and ethnic minorities seeking autonomy.”

“So the CSA next door is pulling the rebel army’s strings... Come to think of it, that makes a lot of sense.”

Kojou made a heavy grimace as he nodded. With that reasoning, he, too, could understand why there was a revolt in the Chaos Zone ruled by the Third Primogenitor. Malcontents were bound to appear, no matter how benign the

monarch. If an enemy nation approached such people—and provided weapons and financing—inciting a revolt was surely no difficult task.

“I suppose so. But there is one thing that bothers me—”

“What?”

“No matter how much weaponry and financial support the CSA might provide, if the Third Primogenitor was serious, she ought to be able to wipe out an entire regional capital garrison single-handedly. Surely the soldiers of a Dominion are not ignorant about how terrifying a primogenitor is, and yet—”

Yukina’s expression grew quiet and concerned. Her words made Kojou catch on to what she meant, too.

“If they’ve started a revolt despite all that...that means...”

“Yes. That they might have obtained some kind of trump card with which they can oppose even a primogenitor.”

“O...kay...”

Kojou suddenly remembered a man named Kristof Gardos.

The remnants of the so-called Black Death Emperor Front had plotted to obtain the ancient weapons known as Nalakuvera in order to oppose the First Primogenitor who ruled the Warlord’s Empire.

Gardos’s plan failed in the end, but the Nalakuvera’s combat capability had indeed been a menace. It was no mere boast that they were capable of opposing a primogenitor. Had Asagi Aiba not turned the tables, Itogami Island would surely have been destroyed by a mere handful of them.

It wasn’t much of a stretch that a rebel army in the Chaos Zone plotting insurrection against a primogenitor like Gardos had weapons on par with the Nalakuvera for its own. That was likely what worried Yukina. But—

“S-senpai, the pot!”

As Kojou was indulging in such reverie, Yukina shouted from beside him. When he suddenly looked, the pot filled with meat simmering over a propane flame was starting to boil over.

“Uh-oh...! ...Yeowch, hot!”

“Senpai?!”

Kojou rushed over to the burner to weaken the flame, inadvertently touching the pot lid in the process. Yukina, seeing this, drew in her breath and said, “Are you all right?! If we do not cool that immediately—”

“Ah...er, it’s probably all right. A little burn like this should heal in no time...”

“That will not do. Even if you are a vampire, proper application of first aid will reduce the time it takes to heal, so—”

She took the hesitant Kojou by the hand and dragged him over to the sink. Kojou, in unexpectedly close quarters with her, was stricken once again by the same tension as before.

“Senpai? What is the matter?” Yukina asked, confused by Kojou’s stiffness.

With her at very close range, he subconsciously looked away from her big eyes and said:

“Er, I was just thinking, Himeragi, it’s a funny feeling standing here in the kitchen, just the two of us...”

“J-just the two of us...”

Realizing that she was, in fact, embracing Kojou from behind, Yukina’s face flushed a deep red. However, having proclaimed she was administering first aid, she could not thrust him aside partway.

Before Kojou’s eyes, with black hair hanging over it, was the back of Yukina’s pale neck.

The pleasant scent of Yukina’s hair pricked at Kojou’s nostrils. He felt the beat of her heart through his back. Even though she was nervous, Yukina made no move of resistance. Kojou swallowed, his throat feeling incredibly dry. And then —

Ding-dong—

“Wh-whoa?!”

“Hyaa?!”

At the sudden ring of the doorbell, Kojou and Yukina separated as if feeling an electric jolt. Simultaneously, the pair deeply exhaled, liberated from the tension. The beats of Kojou's pounding heart were very noisy. As if to conceal his flushed cheeks, he glared in the direction of the entrance in visible consternation.

"Who is it at a time like this?"

"It seems to be a package delivery. Shall I go out?"

"Nah, that's fine. I'll go."

When Yukina moved to take off her apron, Kojou stopped her and headed for the entrance.

When he opened the front door, barely checking first, a male deliveryman was standing there in a uniform he didn't recognize. At his feet rested a large suitcase with a packing slip plastered on it—the kind used for international shipping.

"Package for delivery. Sign here to indicate receipt, please."

"Ah, right, right."

The description of the contents of the package on the packing slip the deliveryman tendered was in flowing, handwritten English. Kojou could only make out his own name and the apartment's address. He imagined that Gajou must have been the one who had sent it. He couldn't think of anyone else who'd send a suspicious international package like that.

"Have a nice day—"

When Kojou finished awkwardly signing, the deliveryman forcefully snatched the packing slip back and proceeded to depart. All that was left in front of the entrance was the giant parcel.

It was a heavy metallic case. It seemed to be nearly a hundred kilograms in weight. Kojou had a little trouble carrying it one-handed, even with his vampiric arm strength.

"What's with this huge suitcase...? Errr.....?!"

Crouching next to the baggage, Kojou checked the packing slip one more

time. Then, when Kojou made out the sender's name, he raised a hoarse cry.

"Geh...! Wait a sec! I don't need this package. Rather, I'd like you to take it back...!"

Kojou leaped out of the entrance barefoot, calling out to the deliveryman. However, the deliveryman was already nowhere to be seen in the apartment building corridor. He was long gone.

"—Wait, he's not here anymore! Shit!!"

Kojou fell to his knees, drained of strength. It was Kojou's mistake to have signed the form without having checked the sender. He ought to have rejected the package and insisted it be returned, whatever it took.

"Senpai? Did something happen?"

Yukina, noticing Kojou's odd state, called out to him. Kojou, clutching his head in anguish, pointed at the suitcase and said:

"*This* happened. Look, here."

"...Eh?! Dimitrie Vattler...the Duke of Ardeal is the sender?!"

Yukina's expression stiffened as she stared at the attached packing slip. The name of the individual written upon it was simply that unexpected.

The sender of the suitcase was Dimitrie Vattler—the battle-maniac vampire native to the Warlord's Empire. The very fact that he'd gone out of his way to send it to Kojou made him imagine that the content was nothing good.

"And I went and signed for it. Aw, shit, I messed up..."

"Th-that does make things difficult. Even if you were to return it, the Duke of Ardeal's ship is not in port..." Yukina murmured, bewildered.

The giant cruise ship upon which Vattler lived had already left port—its whereabouts unknown. Considering that the package had been sent by international shipping, it was a safe bet that he was somewhere outside of Japan.

"Well, we can't just let it sit there without looking at it...can we?" Kojou's expression contorted. He genuinely didn't want to know what was in the

package Vattler had sent him.

However, Yukina nodded in resignation.

“I suppose not. We cannot take countermeasures without checking to see what is inside. There is no guarantee that it is safe so long as it remains unopened.”

“Yeah, you have a point..... Better not be a bomb that blows up the second you open it...”

Kojou shifted an annoyed gaze to the suitcase. As if to console him, Yukina shook her head with an earnest expression.

“I believe there is little need to be concerned about that. After all, senpai, even if your entire body is ripped to pieces, you should return to life immediately, and I can nullify any type of curse or spell with Snowdrift Wolf. Knowing this, I doubt the Duke of Ardeal would do something so futile.”

“That makes logical sense, but he’ll do pretty much anything if it amuses him.”

“Now that you mention it, you have a point...”

Yukina, influenced by Kojou’s blunt statement, bit her lip, as if she feared that as well.

“But waffling about won’t solve anything. Himeragi, please.”

“Yes.”

His resolve apparently hardened, Kojou stood up and carried the suitcase into the living room. In the meantime, Yukina opened up her favorite guitar case, pulling out the silver spear within.

This was a Schneewaltzer, a secret weapon of the Lion King Agency—a purging spear able to rend any barrier and nullify demonic energy. Even if there was a magical trap cast upon the suitcase, so long as Yukina had the spear activated, damage to the surrounding area ought to be minimal at worst. Against physical attacks, she could only pray that Kojou’s Beast Vassals could manage somehow.

Checking to see that Yukina’s preparations were complete, Kojou stretched a

hand toward the suitcase. That was all it took to release the lock; perhaps it had reacted to Kojou's demonic energy. Vattler really had intended for the case to be for Kojou, and Kojou alone.

"Let's do this. Three...two...one...!" Kojou counted "Zero" and simultaneously yanked open the case.

That instant, thick, pure-white mist spewed out of the case.

Naturally, he hadn't expected that to happen. Yukina, too, was bewildered, unable to respond.

"It's cold... What the hell is this?! Dry ice?!"

The room temperature plunged as the white mist enveloped them. However, he felt no danger. The scent and other stimuli were not particularly strange; it was just very cold. Any careless touch with a bare hand would get the frost that was dancing around inside the suitcase onto one's flesh. It was without doubt that the temperature was lower than a freezer's.

Kojou, obstructed by the dense mist, could not tell what was inside the case. He kept his hand on the case's handle, unable to do anything except wait for the mist to clear. And then—

"Get back, senpai. There is a *person* inside—!"

Yukina suddenly turned the tip of her spear toward the case.

Kojou peered through a slender break in the cold mist to see the contents within. Amid the cloudy, freezing air, there was a human being stuffed into the case—one with a petite, beautiful figure.

"A w-woman...?!" Kojou murmured, shocked.

The stark-white mist filling the case cleared away, completely exposing the figure. She had delicate, light-brown skin and honey-colored hair as dazzling as the sun. Her limbs were supple, and her face looked quite young. She had tight hips and a surprisingly abundant swell to her breasts—

Lying on her side inside the case was this young, foreign-born girl—a beautiful young woman wearing not even a single stitch of clothing. However, she did not move. She continued her cold sleep, almost as if she were dead.

“H-how long are you going to continue looking?!”

With Kojou fascinated by the girl, Yukina launched a palm strike at the side of his face.

“Ghoh!” He reeled backward as he held the tip of his nose. Kojou couldn’t help but feel angry at Yukina’s excessive, irrational action. Yes, he was staring at a buck naked girl, but that couldn’t be avoided under the circumstances. It was an act of fate, no matter how you sliced it.



“Well, you don’t have to put it like— Aaah...!”

As Kojou raised his voice to object, fresh blood vigorously flowed out of his nose.

Right in front of Kojou was the completely nude foreign girl lying on her side. Yukina glared sullenly at the sight of Kojou getting a nosebleed while looking down at the two of them.

“Senpai...”

“Y-you’re wrong. This is because you smacked me in the—”

Kojou desperately made excuses as blood flowed from his nose. Yukina stared at Kojou with a cold gaze.

“Indecent.”

She said it like an afterthought in a voice bereft of emotion. Then, she sighed disparagingly.

“Why meeeee?!” Kojou shouted on the spot.

As the two stared at each other like that, the beautiful, foreign girl quietly continued to sleep.

CHAPTER TWO
VISITORS FROM
THE BATTLEFIELD

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VISITORS FROM THE BATTLEFIELD

1

In the nook of a simple room with minimal furniture, there was a bed with an equally simple design. This was Yukina's bedroom in her apartment.

On her side, the foreign-born girl sent in a suitcase lay upon the clean, pastel-blue sheets. Asserting that she could not leave an unconscious girl with Kojou, Yukina had brought the girl into her own room.

The foreigner was wearing a T-shirt and shorts that Kojou had lent. Yukina was unable to dress the girl in her own clothes, chiefly due to the largeness of her breasts. Yukina didn't know if it was a difference in ethnicity, or simple individual variation, but in the battle of bust sizes, the foreign-born girl wielded overwhelming superiority.

And sitting right beside the mysterious young woman was a small-statured, blue-haired homunculus, stethoscope in one hand.

This was the sole experimental Beast Vassal symbiont homunculus in the entire world—Astarte.

“—Body temperature normal. No abnormal heart rate. No external injuries. Background brain waves detected in theta and beta ranges. Diagnosis, stage three: deep sleep.”

The homunculus girl spoke those words in a calm tone largely bereft of intonation.

That day, the girl was wearing a white gown over her usual maid uniform—a rather sharp clash of attire.

Astarte, originally designed as a medical homunculus for a pharmaceutical

corporation, apparently had medical knowledge on par with an MD installed by default. That was why Kojou and Yukina had called her over to examine the still-unconscious foreigner.

Perplexed, Kojou furrowed his brow and asked the homunculus girl, “Meaning what, Astarte?”

Astarte looked over her shoulder with a neutral expression and haltingly replied, “She is...sound asleep.”

“...That is to say, she is merely asleep?” Yukina looked bewildered.

After all, the girl had been frozen, stuffed into a suitcase, and shipped internationally. That she was alive at all was a miracle by any definition. There weren’t many “immortal” vampires who could withstand that.

However, Astarte calmly conveyed the naked truth:

“Affirmative. It is not a magically or chemically induced coma.”

“So what, the case was rigged with something?”

“I suppose so. Most likely.” Yukina gazed at the suitcase standing in a corner of the room and agreed with Kojou’s comment.

A human being, sealed away alive, and revived the instant the seal was opened—though simple at first glance, such a system was built with rather high-level sorcery. It had to have been very expensive. However mad Vattler might be, Yukina didn’t think he’d use such an expensive case to send a mere girl to Kojou’s address for no reason.

“Astarte, can you tell us anything else about her...? I’d love some info on what she is and where she comes from, like, if she’s some kind of special demon or s —”

“Negative. The patient’s biological patterns do not fit any known demons whatsoever.”

Astarte readily shook her head in the face of Kojou’s hopeful question. She completely refuted the possibility that the girl was some kind of rare demon like Yume.

“Ethnically, I can confirm she shares characteristics of Latin American first

nations and European Caucasians. Her physical age is fifteen. She is in excellent health. Her height is one hundred and seventy-one centimeters. Her weight is forty-six kilograms. Beginning with the top, her three sizes are eighty-six—”

“Wait, wait! We don’t need those numbers!”

Kojou rushed to stop Astarte from divulging more of the girl’s personal information. Astarte inclined her head in surprise.

“Question: Have you already taken these measurements for yourself?” she asked.

“Like hell...!”

“When did you...?!” even Yukina exclaimed, watching Kojou with a shocked expression.

“I didn’t!! Don’t take her seriously, Himeragi!

“Why would I even check that?!” Kojou shouted, his voice going hoarse. It was true that the girl had a marvelous body that did not match her age, but he was hardly skillful enough to guess her three sizes from a few glimpses.

“Anyway, ain’t there any other info?! I mean, besides the size of her breasts and stuff!”

“—I deduce that her individual name is Celesta Ciate.”

In contrast to the raggedly breathing Kojou, Astarte continued to speak at her own, measured pace. “What?!” Kojou and Yukina blurted out simultaneously, rocked by the unexpected information.

“How did you know that?” Kojou asked.

“Answer: It is written on the packing slip.”

“Ah...”

Kojou spontaneously felt his strength drain from him when he saw Astarte point at the suitcase. Thanks to there being so many things written, it had escaped his sight, but on the declaration of contents on the home delivery packing slip, it indeed stated CELESTA CIATE, QTY: 1.

“That’s pretty up-front... Well, fine. Anyway, thanks, Astarte. You’ve been a

great help.”

Kojou’s shoulders listlessly fell as he spoke words of appreciation. When Kojou called Astarte out of the blue, she’d come without even asking why. If not for her medical knowledge, Kojou and Yukina would have probably been carrying the still-sleeping Celesta around with nary a clue between them.

“Gratitude is unnecessary. This is a simplified diagnosis, not an accurate examination. Just to be safe, I recommend obtaining a diagnosis from a proper physician.”

“If she was simply some girl who’d fainted, we’d just take her straight to a hospital. But it was that bastard Vattler who sent her, so...”

Kojou sullenly flicked up his forelocks as he gazed at Celesta’s sleeping face. *That* Dimitrie Vattler had sent the girl to Kojou by name. There was no guarantee she was the harmless being she appeared to be. Bringing her to a hospital would potentially put innocent hospital staff and patients in danger.

On the other hand, he was worried about continuing to shelter Celesta as Vattler had apparently intended. He had the unpleasant sense of somehow being that man’s partner in crime.

“Oh-ho. Dimitrie Vattler...the Master of Serpents of the Warlord’s Empire? I have not heard that name in some time. I wonder what he could be up to,” said a conflicted, casual voice, one Kojou abruptly heard from behind. It employed a grandiose tone that was somehow larger-than-life.

“Do you know him, director?”

Replying to that comment was a silver-haired, blue-eyed girl with an air of gentleness hovering around her like that of a saint. She was Kanon Kanase, Yukina’s classmate. And sitting cross-legged on her lap was a beautiful Eastern doll about thirty centimeters tall.

With a jiggle of the doll’s bountiful breasts, she inclined her head, as if searching through vague memories and said, “I met him in person once, about a century ago... No, perhaps it was two centuries...?”

With an annoyed look on his face, Kojou stared at the doll and Kanon as he asked, “...So, Kanase, what’s with the getup you two are in?”

Kanon was not wearing the familiar uniform of Saikai Academy but rather a pure-white, long-skirted apron dress. The outfit made her look like a military nurse auxiliary from the time of the Great European War. The color made Kanon resemble an angel, suiting her to an almost bizarre degree—but Kojou didn't want to think that she wore cosplay normally.

"I...I am Astarte's assistant," Kanon spoke in a little voice as she looked toward the floor, seemingly blushing as she held down her nurse's cap.

"Assistant?" Kojou nodded, his face vaguely saying *Okaaay*.

Kanon Kanase and Astarte were living as houseguests at Natsuki Minamiya's residence. When Kojou had contacted Astarte, Kanon had delivered his message. That said, he didn't think Kanon, a mere middle schooler, could work as Astarte's assistant, but—

"Do not fault Kanon too greatly, Kojou. When she heard you ask Astarte to give an examination, she wrongly believed that you had collapsed, so she got it in her head to nurse you."

The doll sitting on Kanon's lap spoke up in her defense.

No, properly speaking, she wasn't a doll at all; she was what was left of Nina Adelard, once called the Great Alchemist of Yore.

Nina, having lost most of her physical flesh during the Wiseman's Blood incident, had been the size of a small pet ever since, remaining under Kanon's care. However, even in her diminutive form, her haughty demeanor remained undaunted, but perhaps that was testament to her greatness.

"D-director!" Kanon cried in a panic, her pale, almost translucent skin tinged a deep red.

Nina looked up at the flustered Kanon with a dubious look. "What? Is it not the truth?"

"Really...? Thanks, Kanase."

With Kanon shrinking in embarrassment, Kojou gave her his honest thanks. After all, this was Kanon, who'd once tried to care for fourteen stray cats at once, unable to turn her back on a single one. He thought of her as a girl who

would never leave a sick acquaintance to rot.

“Not at all... It was for you, after all...”

Speaking these words, Kanon smiled, delighted. Yukina, listening to their exchange, cleared her throat.

“So what do you intend to do with the girl, senpai?”

“Good question... The trouble is, I’d love to leave her to Natsuki if I could, but...”

Kojou grimaced as he spoke. Put bluntly, managing Celesta was too much for them to handle. He genuinely wanted to shove the whole thing onto a trustworthy, professional Attack Mage without a moment to spare.

However—

“Master is on a special patrol mission at the request of the Island Guard,” Astarte replied in a businesslike tone.

Kojou had an unpleasant premonition as he narrowed his eyes and asked, “... Special patrol mission?”

“Affirmative. According to information, signs have been detected of unregistered demons infiltrating the country.”

“Infiltrating the... Wait, you’re not talking about her, are you...?”

Kojou pointed at Celesta as he wondered aloud. After all, she’d been stuffed in a box and sent by way of home delivery. He didn’t exactly think proper customs procedures had been followed.

That said, did Celesta really pose enough danger to warrant a special patrol?

“Unclear. I cannot reply due to insufficient data.”

“That figures...”

Kojou made no objection to Astarte’s simple reply. Yukina, too, merely nodded without a word.

“I guess all we can do is wait and see for now. If she...Celesta...is just sleeping, she should wake up sometime soon, right? Maybe Vattler will get in touch before that happens. Sorry, Astarte, could you try to get in touch with Natsuki

for me?”

“Accepted.”

The homunculus girl nodded. Legally speaking, Astarte had been put under Natsuki Minamiya’s guardianship. There was surely no one better to entrust with a message while Natsuki was with the Island Guard.

“Well then, Kanon and I shall prepare dinner during that time. As you can see, we have already finished purchasing ingredients,” Nina said, albeit in a condescending manner. Apparently, ingredients for supper were inside the numerous bags Kanon had carried in.

“I’m grateful to hear that, but...I’m kinda surprised. Setting Kanon aside, you can cook, too?” asked Kojou in surprise.

Certainly, Nina was an excellent alchemist, but the way she typically spoke and acted made Kojou unable to shake the image that she couldn’t do proper cooking.

Nina responded to Kojou’s stark doubts with a ferocious smile. “Do not underestimate me. I am she who has mastered the Magnum Opus. I shall demonstrate the quintessence of cooking from my homeland of Parmia. It has been two centuries. I cannot wait.”

“Wait, two centuries, is that all right here?! Is it really?!” exclaimed Kojou as a nervous sweat spread across his back.

“...Himeragi, sorry, but could you watch over Kanase and Nina’s cooki..... Himeragi?”

Kojou addressed her in a quiet voice, but Yukina made no immediate response. Her eyes seemed glazed over as they stared somewhere off in the distance, yet in spite of that, she held her breath with an oddly serious expression.

After a brief delay, she finally noticed Kojou and said, “Ah, senpai. I apologize.”

“...Something happen?” Kojou watched her soberly.

“No, it is all right. I simply felt as if someone was watching me. I believe it was

my imagination. There is an anti-intrusion barrier around this apartment, after all.”

“I-is that so?”

“Yes. Therefore, please leave the seasoning of Nina’s cooking to me.”

Yukina raised her face with a look of pride. She pointed toward the kitchen of the Himeragi residence which, for some reason, was stocked with a large quantity of mayonnaise...

“R-right...”

As Yukina aggressively rolled up her sleeves, Kojou stared and nodded weakly.

Beside them, the foreign girl continued sleeping peacefully, moaning with an expression that suggested she was having a dream.

2

Natsuki Minamiya picked up the phone call at a viewing lounge on the top floor of the airport. The number displayed on her cell phone’s screen was not one she remembered recording.

“Heya, Teacher Girl. How are ya? It’s me, me—!”

The greeting coming through the speaker was that of a very chummy middle-aged man. She knew that voice. The velvety tone only served to make it all the more irritating.

“...” Natsuki knit her brows indifferently and quietly ended the call.

She was about to return the cell phone to her bag, but the incoming ringtone sounded once more. “Goodness,” Natsuki muttered, letting out a long sigh and grudgingly touching the phone to her ear.

“Hey now, don’t suddenly hang up without one word of greeting. At least let me thank you for taking care of my idiot son.”

“...What is it, grave robber? I did not plan for a three-party conversation.” Natsuki questioned him back with a chilly tone.

The caller was Gajou Akatsuki. From Natsuki's point of view, he was the father of one of her pupils.

More precisely, Natsuki knew Gajou Akatsuki before his son had ever enrolled in Saikai Academy. The father was an archeologist, a field worker who traveled to conflict zones the world over, pilfering excavated goods during the turmoil of combat—a hairbreadth from looting during a fire.

It was on one such battlefield that Natsuki had met him.

"I wanted to do a little informing. I'd love it if you followed up, but..." Gajou spoke in a manner that was, for once, sober and serious.

A blatant expression of wariness came over Natsuki. According to rumor, Gajou Akatsuki had been out on an excavation on the fringes of the Chaos Zone until a few short days prior.

"Informing, you say. Where are you right now?"

"I just landed at Haneda Airport. That civil war–related job got canceled at the last minute, see. I brought my daughter with me for homecoming. But plane tickets to Japan are so expensive. And when did they jack up the price of midflight beers? Real pain in the ass."

"Just get to the point already. If you don't want me to expose the sins of your past to your lovely bride, that is."

The barbs in Natsuki's voice increased. She felt like Gajou was smirking on the other end of the line.

"Okay, got it. The main topic. You know of a chick named Angelica Hermida?"

"...No, I don't know her."

Natsuki shook her head after a brief pause. She possessed confidence in never forgetting the name of a single Attack Mage or sorcerous criminal after hearing it initially over the course of her work. However, this was the first time she'd heard of Angelica Hermida.

"Didn't think so," Gajou said rather bluntly. *"Not any fault of yours. She's not your run-of-the-mill sorcerous criminal."*

"Who is she?"

"She's the head of Zenforce—CSA Army's special forces company."

"A soldier...?"

"That's right. Rank of major. She participated in military interrogations on the government side in the Andes Commonwealth civil war four years ago. It's said that she commanded a unit of forty-four people, who killed almost two thousand guerillas, earning her the nickname of Bloodstained Angelica—what makes it a little tough is that she's a real babe. In an expensive designer coat, she looks like a celebrity's trophy wife."

"...Why do you know all this, Gajou Akatsuki?"

Natsuki's face grew graver still at how Gajou was speaking like he'd seen her in person.

"Well," said Gajou, breaking into laughter, his behavior lacking all trace of seriousness, *"that's because I walked right past her a few minutes ago."*

"What...?!"

"She was waiting for a flight to Itogami Island in the lobby here at Haneda. By now, she's probably landed over on your end. I couldn't confirm who she had with her, but it's probably a four-man squad at absolute minimum," Gajou commented, as if he was discussing idle gossip.

Natsuki's lips twisted in distinct displeasure.

"And you just watched them go without lifting a finger?"

"Damn right I did. I'm a civilian here—what did you expect? Of course, I put my daughter's safety first."

"Tch," went Natsuki, nastily clicking her tongue.

Though it annoyed her to an almost unbelievable degree to admit, Gajou was right. Even if he did possess combat skill on par with a mercenary, Gajou was still a civilian in the end. He had no reason to fight Angelica Hermida.

"The CSA, yes...? There seem to be a lot of fishy movements taking place around the Chaos Zone lately."

"Your understanding the situation makes this a lot quicker. Well, that's how it

is, so I'll leave it in your hands," Gajou said. "Later."

His quick farewell was the last thing he said before hanging up unbidden. When the cell phone fell silent, Natsuki glared at it, clicking her tongue once more.

Just as Gajou Akatsuki had indicated, a flight from Haneda had been scheduled to arrive at Itogami Island only a few minutes prior. The passengers were probably heading to the customs counter that very moment.

She did not know Angelica Hermida's objective. However, it was hard to believe that a member of a foreign nation's special forces would visit the Far East Demon Sanctuary for no reason. Considering her relationship to the civil war in the Chaos Zone, that much was virtually certain.

The Chaos Zone in Central America was the Dominion ruled by the Third Primogenitor, the Chaos Bride.

And on Itogami Island lived the Fourth Primogenitor—

"...Can I make it in time?"

Natsuki fished out her personal radio for communicating with the Island Guard.

She could worry later. Angelica Hermida could not be permitted onto Itogami Island. They needed to detain her in the airport before ever reaching the city. She gave orders to that effect to the responsible party in the Island Guard, and immediately after—

Natuski heard the sudden sound of intense gunfire, accompanied by the screams of people fleeing.

3

"Aah—..."

In the kitchen of Yukina's apartment, two middle schoolers and one doll continued to cook in silence.

Kojou watched them with a nervous expression punctuated by cold sweat.

Yukina, who lived by herself, had the bare minimum equipment required for cooking. She employed a single combat knife for everything from peeling vegetables to slicing meat off bones to even opening canned food.

That very moment, she was pulverizing cow bones for soup stock through brute force. The sight of Yukina waving a giant knife around in a cramped kitchen looked less like cooking and more like a particularly pitiful display.

As Yukina prepared the soup, Kanon was frying food in a wok.

Though it was not especially surprising, Kanon's level of cooking skill was average for her age. Her work was diligent, but Kojou couldn't call it skillful, even as flattery. Put simply, it was precarious. Kojou's heart was on edge as he watched her sway the heavy pot around. He felt like a father covertly watching over a child in kindergarten.

"Um...you know, maybe I could help with something?"

Kojou, finally reaching the limit of his endurance, addressed the pair. As he did...

"A-Akatsuki, I am sorry. You would be...in the way."

"Eh? Whoaaa!"

When Kojou looked back in response to Kanon's statement, he was greeted by flame spewing from the wok in her hands. Set atop a propane burner, the heated oil within had caught fire.

Kojou's upper body recoiled from the stark pillar of flame rising before his eyes.

"What is that? Cooking?! Is that cooking?!"

"Do not be concerned. 'Tis the cooking technique known as charring. In Parmia cooking, fire is life. A first-rate cook can manipulate flame akin to her own hands and feet, as you see before you."

As Kojou stared on in total shock, Nina spoke confidently, looking like she was experienced in such matters.

"Er...it doesn't seem like you're controlling it much at all. And that's not Parmia cooking, that's just normal Chinese, isn't it...? And in the first place,

what are you bragging about? You're making Kanase do the cooking."

"It cannot be helped. I cannot shake a pot at my size. More importantly, the next ingredients. Kanon, prepare the meat. Yukina, I entrust preparing the fish to you."

"Yes, director."

Meekly obeying Nina's instructions, Kanon pulled some beef out of the freezer. She began making some kind of silent prayer toward the beef as if she was giving thanks. For Kojou, it was a surreal scene difficult to comprehend.

For her part, Yukina laid some mysterious object on its side atop the counter and said, "Senpai, could you stand back a little?"

"Sure... Wait, what the hell is *that*?!"

"I believe it is a species of deep-sea fish."

The thing she had deposited onto the counter was an amorphous, soft, flabby object that seemed almost like a mass of gelatin. Its entire body was covered with black specks, and Kojou couldn't exactly call the bulging eyeball charming. Surely, if not for the short, perfunctory tail, few people would think it was a fish. It was a mysterious life-form that seemed like a cross between puffer fish, catfish, anglerfish, and slime.

"I-is this...edible?"

"Do not be concerned. 'Tis the most prized ingredient of all in the land of my birth."

"Is it really?" muttered Kojou in the face of Nina's proud comment. "Um, Himeragi."

"I-it is not a problem. I have received survival training from the Lion King Agency, so...!"

Yukina, gripping her combat knife harder, seemed to have said that for her own benefit. It seemed like mostly stubbornness rather than any actual confidence in it as an ingredient.

However, the knife Yukina thrust into the deep-sea fish was obstructed by some mysterious membrane covering it. Half out of annoyance, Yukina raised

her brows at the unexpectedly fierce combat and drew a second knife. Alternating left and right swings of her paired blades, her deadly duel with the deep-sea fish recommenced.

“...Sorry. I’ll leave you to it.”

With those final words, Kojou walked out of the kitchen. Apparently, the situation was beyond his means. All he could do was pray that they would safely reach the point of something edible. *If only Nagisa were here at a time like this*, he could not help thinking.

“Haah...”

A sigh trickled out of Kojou as he made his way toward the bedroom in which Celesta rested.

Astarte still silently observed Celesta as she slept. Noticing that Kojou was drawing near, the homunculus girl lifted her face without making a sound.

“Astarte, how’s Celesta doing?”

“Continuous sleep. Rapid eye movement and skeletal muscle relaxation confirmed. Brain wave state is predominately theta. Heart rate and breathing are both uneven.”

“Er...what...does all that mean...?”

The series of unfamiliar specialized terms bewildered Kojou.

Astarte emotionlessly blinked and stated, “I believe she is dreaming.”

“Dreams...huh? Nothing good by the looks of it...,” Kojou muttered as he stared at Celesta’s sleeping face. Her expression, including the biting of her tongue, made her look like she was having a nightmare, or perhaps even crying.

“Suggestion. I request the lending of your cell phone and permission to contact Master again.”

Astarte suddenly spoke, extending her hand toward Kojou.

“Huh? Ahh, you wanna try calling Natsuki again?”

Kojou handed his own cell phone to Astarte’s tendered hand. With Natsuki on duty, she’d tried calling repeatedly earlier but had yet to get through.

“Well, I’ll look after her for a bit, so...,” Kojou said, kneeling beside the bed. He was bereft of medical knowledge, but he could at least stay close to Celesta as she slept.

“I thank you, Fourth Primogenitor.”

Astarte politely bowed her head and left the room.

With nothing else to do, Kojou stared absentmindedly, watching Celesta as she slept.

She had light-brown skin and hair the color of honey. Her graceful visage was the sort typical of those descended from multiple races. However, her sleeping face seemed very young, giving the impression that she was no special individual at all. In short, Celesta was just a normal girl—albeit a little prettier than most.

After all, Astarte’s examination had determined she wasn’t a demon, and even up close, there was no whiff of magic about her. He couldn’t think of a single reason why Vattler of all people would give her the time of day. Kojou began to wonder if the man had sent Celesta to him just to get under his skin again—

It was when such doubts began to creep into Kojou that his and Celesta’s eyes suddenly met.

Ostensibly sleeping, Celesta opened her eyelids, and her big, bright brown eyes looked up at Kojou’s face. Her gaze was unfocused; maybe she wasn’t fully awake.

“H...heya...”

Kojou led off by greeting her with a raised hand, displaying his lack of hostile intent. Then—

As Celesta’s eyes looked at Kojou, they suddenly overflowed with tears.

“Su Excelencia...”

Words trickled from Celesta’s lips—foreign words unknown to Kojou.

“Huh?”

“¡Su Excelencia Señor Vattler! ¡Nací para amarte! ¡Quiero verte!”

Celesta strongly rose to her feet. She proceeded to embrace Kojou without hesitation, with fervor as if she'd been reunited with a long-lost lover—

“W...wait, Celesta! C-calm down! Wake up!!”

Kojou's voice went shrill as his entire body froze. He could feel the bounciness of Celesta's breasts through the T-shirt's fabric. The sobbing girl's breaths were hot on his neck.

“¡Su Excelencia! ¡Su Excelencia Señor Vattler! Sí, me salvaste la vida...”

Celesta cried out in a tear-choked voice. Kojou gasped and came back to his senses from the one word he managed to make out.

“Vattler...? Wait, you're confusing me with Vattler?!”

Kojou pried Celesta off him and peered into her face.

That instant, Celesta's eyes saw Kojou distinctly. She blinked several times over, as if unable to believe her eyes; her expression twitched with shock.

Then, after taking a deep breath, she screamed at an incredible volume.

“Kyaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

“—Oww!”

Slapped by Celesta, Kojou was sent flying, crashing right into the wall.

“¡¿Quién eres tú?! ¡¿Dónde estoy?! ¡¿Por qué me engañas?! ¡Qué bestia! Hentai!”

Celesta huddled onto a corner of the bed, unleashing a string of rapid-fire insults. A look of fear and hatred came into her eyes as she glared at Kojou.

Hearing the ruckus, Yukina and the others hurried over to the bedroom.

“Senpai?! What was that sound?!”

They were greeted by the sight of Celesta, shivering with tears in her eyes, and Kojou with the mark of her hand on his cheek. Emotion drained from Yukina's eyes as she stared at him.



“...Senpai...what did you do to Celesta...?”

“W...wait, Himeragi. This isn’t what you think...!”

Nervous, Kojou desperately shook his head. As he did, Kanon stared at him and sadly shook her head as she said, “Akatsuki, I trusted you...and yet...”

“So not only are you the Fourth Primogenitor but a vulgar sex offender as well. Perhaps this is the libido of youth running wild?” Nina remarked in a strangely analytical tone, squatting on Kanon’s shoulder.

Furthermore...

“Upon reflection, supervision was inadequate,” Astarte murmured calmly as she returned.

“Gaaah! Wait, all of you! Shut up and listen instead of just calling someone a sex offender! *She’s* the one who was hugging *me*!”

Kojou, irritated at the reproachful gazes trained on him from all present, pointed at Celesta and shouted. Celesta’s shoulders quivered in fear. Watching this, Yukina exhaled slightly.

“So she was hugging you... I see...”

Her voice was devoid of warmth, oozing with unconcealed anger.

“No, I’m innocent,” Kojou insisted, fleetingly shaking his head. He looked up at the ceiling and shouted:

“It’s a misunderstandiiiiiiiiing!”

4

Space distorted, and Natsuki leaped.

Her destination was the security control room on the top floor of the airport building. It was the command center for all security inside the airport. The interior of the room, reminiscent of the bridge of a warship, had eight operators and the head of the command center on standby.

In normal times, their work was, in a word, tedious. All the security personnel

did was exchange banter between them or quietly watch images from security cameras.

However, that day was different. The monitors in the control center were packed to the brim with countless warnings, and the replies over the radio were in shouted voices on the verge of bursting. Behind the operators, desperately tapping their keyboards, the security room chief stood rooted to the spot in blank astonishment.

“What is it, chief?”

Natsuki bluntly posed the question to the pale-faced officer.

“A-Attack Mage Minamiya!”

Noticing her presence, the chief made an expression as if salvation had arrived.

Natsuki, an independent federal Attack Mage, was less an official member of the Island Guard than a gun for hire. Normally, she was often treated as a pest, relied upon only in times of emergency.

Apparently, an emergency was precisely what prevailed that moment.

“An incident at the entrance’s inspection gate! A passenger suspected of false documentation was being led to a side room when she attempted to break through by force—!”

“A female passenger from a flight from Haneda, yes?” Natsuki murmured while glancing up at a security room monitor.

They’d already visually identified the passenger who’d kicked up the incident: a Caucasian woman wearing a fur-trimmed coat. Her characteristics matched those of Angelica Hermida as described by Gajou over the phone.

She was slender but had excellent posture and long limbs. Her ashen hair was cut short, giving off the impression of some kind of fashion model. However, anyone looking closer would immediately notice that her movements were not like a model’s but more akin to a well-trained soldier’s.

“It pains me to admit it, but it’s just as he expected...! Tell the squad captains, the enemy is military special forces. Do not underestimate her, even if she is

unarmed. She likely has squad mates nearby,” Natsuki cautioned, opening her lace-trimmed fan.

Angelica Hermida had already defeated a number of airport security personnel attempting to arrest her. And she continued calmly walking along, even with armed members of the Island Guard surrounding her. The guardsmen had delivered a succession of commands and warning shots, but Angelica had shown no signs of caring.

“Special forces...? But what could she be trying to do, without weapons or magical gear on—”

Thus did the security room chief attempt to rebut Natsuki. However, before his words finished, one of the operators let out a shriek.

“S-squad six, two guardsmen wounded— No, eight casualties! Communications cut! They’ve been wiped out!”

“What?!”

The chief’s expression froze over. Natsuki emotionlessly glanced at a monitor, but the corresponding security camera had already been destroyed. Angelica Hermida’s subordinates had begun moving in earnest.

“They’ve broken through Section Five’s exterior wall! No response from squad five or squad seven! Criminal group will arrive at the lobby at any moment!”

“Ugh...! Urgently assemble all units able to respond. Blockade the gate! Don’t let them escape! Get in touch with Island Guard headquarters and the Gigafloat Management Corporation! Hurry!”

“Wait, chief. Don’t blockade the gate,” Natsuki cut in, interrupting the security room chief’s words.

The chief’s eyes widened, as if unable to believe his own ears.

“B...but, Attack Mage!”

“The safety of civilians takes priority. This is a group that can break through exterior walls unarmed. Blockading the gate is futile. As long as they don’t start a gunfight in the lobby, there’s no point trying that hard to stop them.”

“Th-that’s... No, you’re...!”

The chief grunted, Natsuki's level-headed assertion seeming to make him swallow his words. Apparently, even if the sudden uproar had rocked him on his heels, the man was not so incompetent that he couldn't assess the situation.

"N-notify all squad captains! Avoid unnecessary combat and prioritize the safety of ordinary travelers!"

"Roger. Notifying all squad captains. Gate blockade, lifted!"

"Squad thirteen, contact lost! Requesting medical personnel—!"

The chaos within the control room increased. However, on the other side, Angelica Hermida and others, appearing in arrival lobby, were, if anything, walking serenely. They seemed keenly aware that the Island Guard lacked the combat strength to stop them.

"Non-lethal wounds, is it? You're loyal to theory, Angelica Hermida," Natsuki murmured offhandedly to herself.

Angelica's unit passed by, leaving only bloodstained guardsmen on the floor behind them. Though all had undoubtedly been gravely wounded, no guardsmen had yet died on duty. Angelica and her people had avoided their vitals.

But that was certainly not an act of mercy toward their enemies.

The presence of casualties in pain lowered the enemy army's morale, and transporting and treating the wounded cost it more manpower than actually killing the enemy's soldiers. That was battlefield theory—something that Angelica's unit strictly practiced.

That fact provided Natsuki with another piece of information.

Namely, that Angelica and the others were not engaged in simple criminal acts. They were soldiers through and through. In other words, their infiltration of Itogami Island was an operation as part of the CSA Army to which they belonged. Angelica Hermida and her subordinates had landed on Itogami Island to carry out some kind of mission.

"Let's give something a little try—"

Natsuki drew close to the control room window. With Angelica and her

people exiting the airport building, she was basically looking right down at them. Then, Natsuki made a swipe with her folded fan.

One moment later, the ground at Angelica's group's feet swayed like a ripple.

Silver chains spewed forth from the surface of the ground. This was Laeding, forged by the gods, a magical object used for capture. Countless chains under Natsuki's control moved to bind Angelica Hermida's slender body—

“...?!”

The instant she thought she had accomplished her capture, a dazzling purple ray raced across the space surrounding Angelica.

The silver chains bounced off the glow that now surrounded her. Then, without warning, the glass window of the control room was smashed to pieces before Natsuki's eyes.

“A-Attack Mage...?!”

The control room chief called out to Natsuki in a quivering voice. Natsuki did not respond. All she did was sway her fan without flourishing it, brushing away the glass fragments that had showered her entire body.

“Goodness...and I really liked this outfit, too.”

Natsuki spoke with a tone of displeasure. Her own body was largely unharmed. However, the extravagant dress she was wearing had been cruelly sliced to ribbons by the glass fragments.

The instant she'd been attacked by Natsuki's chains, the “unarmed” Angelica had unleashed vast demonic energy rivaling that of an Old Guard vampire, which coursed back through the chains, attacking Natsuki in turn.

Without a word, Angelica Hermida looked up at the control room and glared at Natsuki.

She and Natsuki shared a gaze for only a single moment. Angelica proceeded to walk away, and Natsuki watched her go without a word. It was all over in an instant.

“‘Bloodstained’ Angelica...yes? You will pay dearly for this.”

Natsuki's little lips curled up as she laughed beautifully.

Stretched before her eyes was Itogami Island's evening sky.

The cityscape, illuminated by the dazzling rays of the setting sun, was an ominous scarlet, as if submerged in fresh blood.

5

Nina Adelard was an alchemist. Her immutable physical body was a liquid-metal life-form composed of what had been dubbed Wiseman's Blood.

Wiseman's Blood—living metal said to be the pinnacle of alchemy—was in and of itself a vast source of magical energy, and a high-spec magical object capable of freely altering its own form.

Using a piece of that liquid metal, Nina had created a small silver earring. With an expression of unease still on Celesta's face, Nina affixed it to her ear.

"Very good. Written text is a step too far, but it should suffice for spoken conversation."

Nina chanted a brief spell, and a magic symbol emerged on the surface of the earring. The magical translator had been activated.

Yukina politely bowed her head.

"Thank you very much, Nina."

Not being able to speak to Celesta now that she had finally awoken had them in a bind. According to Nina, the words used by Celesta were similar to, but oddly different from, the lingua franca of the Chaos Zone. That was a solid lead indicating Celesta was native to a land somewhere nearby.

"As expected of you, director."

Kanon smiled warmly and lifted Nina up.

Nina arrogantly reclined with a grandiose expression and said, "Indeed, you should extol me greatly. However, such a spell is child's play for a master of alchemy such as I."

“...That’d come off a little more majestic if it wasn’t *you* saying it, though.”

It was Kojou, lying on the floor, who grumbled those words with a sullen look on his face.

Kojou’s limbs were bound with chains, measures taken to reassure the frightened Celesta. Incidentally, Kojou’s parka had been used as the raw resource for those chains, transmuted, of course, by Nina the alchemist.

Nina shook her head at Kojou’s sulky stare with a look of amazement and said, “It seems you do not wish it said that you are a perverted primogenitor who enjoys being bound.”

“I’m not enjoying it! The understanding’s been cleared up, so lemme go already! And for that matter, you’re gonna turn my parka back to normal, right?!”

“Not a problem. There may be a twenty-to thirty-percent reduction in volume, but do not be concerned.”

“Like hell I won’t! A parka’s not something you can wear if it shrinks twenty to thirty percent!”

“—Senpai, would you please be a little quieter?”

Yukina scolded Kojou, whose voice was rising as he complained. Then, she began to speak to Celesta, sitting on the bed and holding her knees, like one would approach a small animal with its guard up.

“Do you understand me, Celesta? Celesta Ciate—yes?”

Responding to Yukina’s address, the foreign-born girl gradually raised her face.

Naked suspicion hovered in Celesta’s eyes. She gave Yukina’s entire body a once-over, going “Hmph,” seemingly disparaging her with a little, scornful laugh.

“Before asking another’s name, should you not first state your own, Plain Girl?”

“P-plain...?! ”

Blindsided by insults from the purportedly frightened Celesta, Yukina was momentarily at a loss for words. That said, it was a fact that Yukina came off as less distinctive compared to Celesta's showy, glamorous looks. Yukina, perhaps tentatively aware of that herself, quickly recovered her senses.

"Forgive my rudeness. Yukina Himeragi. Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency."

"Sword Shaman? Lion King Agency?"

Celesta tilted her head slightly, clearly at a loss. Apparently, Nina's translation spell did not go so far as to translate proper names outside of the person's own knowledge.

Noticing this, Yukina quickly shook her head and corrected, "Ah... In other words, a priestess. A combat variety."

"Priestess? You too?"

Celesta raised her eyebrows in visible surprise. Yukina faintly narrowed her eyes at the words Celesta had spoken so casually. However, the foreign girl shrugged her shoulders, seeming to immediately lose interest with Yukina.

"And the pervert over there as well?" Celesta asked.

"Who's a pervert?!"

Kojou, still rolling around on the floor, bared his teeth in irritation. Surely there was a no reason for someone he'd barely met to peg him as such.

However, Celesta leaned forward, glaring antagonistically at Kojou as she said, "If you do not like *pervert*, then *swindler*. You criminal! Human scum! To think you would pretend to be Lord Vattler in an attempt to seduce me!"

"Like I'd pretend to be him! And you mistook me for him all on your own while you were still half asleep!"

"Shut up, pervert! Garbage person! Dung beetle!"

"Y-you're just a girl who was stuffed in a box...!"

Kojou growled, clenching his teeth while overwhelmed by Celesta's vilification. However, for her part, Celesta began to wheeze and make little

coughs, perhaps because she'd become so suddenly worked up. For all Kojou knew, maybe she was not yet fully recovered from the aftereffects of cryostasis.

Kanon, seeing her in distress, quietly slipped out of the bedroom, returning with a cup of water.

"Would you like some water to drink?"

"Th...thank you."

Celesta, her cheeks reddened with a guilty look, accepted the cup offered to her. Apparently, even Celesta could not manage much bluster in the face of Kanon's gentle smile.

"What is...your name?"

"I am Kanon Kanase. I am a friend of Yukina's. This is the director and Astarte."

"...Director?"

Celesta shifted a perplexed stare toward Nina, the mysterious woman standing less than thirty centimeters tall. Furthermore, she employed suspicious spells that could freely alter the shape of things. Celesta's discomfort was natural.

"Nina Adelard. Some would call me the Great Alchemist of Yore."

However, Nina boldly introduced herself without regard for Celesta's bewilderment.

"R-right..."

An expression of even greater confusion came over Celesta, but she cut the subject short, apparently deeming it something she wouldn't understand either way. She made a heavy sigh and changed the subject.

"...So that pervert is...?"

"That would be Big Bro."

When Celesta pointed at Kojou, Kanon replied. Celesta's eyes widened in surprise a little as she said:

"Big Bro? You are his little sister, then?"

“No, by that I mean he’s Nagisa’s older brother.”

Kanon instantly replied with a smile. Celesta knitted her brows in mental anguish.

“Who is this...Nagisa?”

“My friend.”

“I’m sorry... I don’t understand a word that you’re saying.”

Celesta’s shoulders fell in dismay. “Goodness,” Kojou said to himself, seemingly unable to just lie down and watch as he exhaled.

“Nagisa’s my little sister. Kanase and Himeragi are her friends,” he explained.

“Hmmm.”

Then, just say that to begin with, Celesta’s sullen stare at Kojou seemed to indicate. Kojou languidly twisted his lips, glaring right back at her.

“I’m Kojou Akatsuki. You can just call me Kojou. So you were shipped over here to my place. The sender turned out to be Vattler. You know anything about that, Celesta?”

“...Call him Lord, would you,” Celesta replied in a low voice.

“Huh?”

“Do not address Lord Vattler without the honorific, pervert!”

“Oh, come on, that doesn’t matter!”

Using only his abdominal muscles, Kojou forced himself upright as he retorted.

However, Celesta furiously shook her hair as she insisted, “Yes, it does! Lord Vattler is the only person I have... And yet, why do I have to be in a place with someone like...”

“Hey, just to be clear here, you’re the one causing me trouble...!”

Kojou lowered the tone of his voice before the hard-pressed look on Celesta’s face.

Naturally, Kojou had no reason to pay Vattler any respects. Considering the

things the man had done to date, Kojou had mixed feelings about even using his name.

But that had nothing to do with Celesta. In the first place, she was the one who'd been stuffed in a box and shipped off to a man she didn't know. Perhaps Celesta was the biggest victim there.

"So in the end, you don't actually know the reason why you were shipped to my place—?"

"I've been saying that this whole time, haven't I? Are you an idiot?! You are, aren't you?!"

"What?!"

"Stop!! Please wait, senpai—! *Stay!*"

Yukina checked Kojou, who was ticked off over Celesta's words of abuse, with a tone as if rebuking a domesticated dog.

Then Yukina turned to the foreign-born girl, and as if she was making sure of something, asked solemnly, "Celesta... Could it be that you have amnesia?"

"...?!"

That instant, Celesta's expression showed visible strain.

Without a word, she leaned forward and strongly bit her lip. Kojou gazed at her reaction in astonishment. Without thinking, his voice slipped right out.

"Amnesia...?"

"Wh...what? Do you have a problem with that?"

The voice with which Celesta rudely retorted had largely lost the barbs from before.

Celesta had lost her memory. She didn't even know her own name. That would explain her reaction when Yukina had asked for her name earlier.

Celesta's hostile attitude toward Kojou and the others was the product of anxiety. She was bluffing with all her might to conceal the fact that she had lost her memory.

Indeed, Celesta had no memory. None, save that of Vattler—

“Ah... Er, I mean... I was wrong. Sorry.” Kojou grudgingly bowed his head.

Celesta grimaced in visible discomfort as she said, “Wh-what’s that for? Why are you apologizing? It’s creepy. Are you trying to act superior?”

She spoke in a sulky-sounding tone. She seemed dissatisfied with Kojou’s display of humility.

“Mmm, I see... The cause of your amnesia is likely being bathed in powerful demonic energy at close range. That would make your encounter with Dimitrie Vattler the oldest memory you possess, yes?” Nina inquired while climbing atop Celesta’s head.

Celesta dejectedly addressed the alchemist on top of her. “He is the one who saved me when I was about to be killed in the temple.”

“...Temple?” Yukina mumbled.

She had met Vattler on the verge of being killed at some kind of temple, then was shipped to Itogami Island: That was the entirety of what Celesta could remember.

Kojou asked the homunculus girl in a quiet voice, “Astarte, can we get her memory back?”

However, Astarte’s expression remained neutral as she shook her head.

“Since I do not recognize any traces of head trauma or the use of drugs, I believe the cause is psychological. Magical or hypnotic treatment could force recovery of memory but could also present dangers; so I cannot recommend them.”

“Ah...okay.”

A melancholic expression clouded Kojou’s expression as he stared at Celesta.

Celesta’s face twitched, seemingly thrown off by Kojou’s serious demeanor. “Wh-what?”

“Nah, I just...had an experience that’s kinda similar to yours... No matter how bad a memory is, it’s tough not to be able to remember it yourself and stuff.”

“D-do not lump me in with you. If I can remember Lord Vattler, that is

plenty...”

Celesta’s cheeks faintly reddened as she put on a strong front. Thanks to Kojou, her expression seemed to have softened somehow.

Then, taking Celesta’s release from stress as its signal, her stomach let out an odd sound: a healthy, humorous, rumbling noise—

“Er, shall we have something to eat?” Kanon suggested as Celesta doubled over in embarrassment.

Not a single soul objected.

6

Lined side by side upon the dining table were large plates filled to the brim with countless varieties of unfamiliar dishes.

All were bizarrely colorful, perhaps prepared in relative excess, but Kojou couldn’t even imagine how they had been made. He couldn’t even tell the difference between what had been boiled, baked, or stir-fried.

Oddly enough, however, the aroma of the powerful spices hovering in the air piqued his appetite.

“This is cooking from your nation?” Celesta asked with visible anxiety as she prodded the food allotted to her with the tip of her fork.

Kojou scooped some gelled, pudding-like liquid with a spoon as he replied, “Nah... At the very least, I don’t think it’s Japanese food, but...”

His answer was somewhat vague.

Sitting beside him, Astarte was bringing the food to her mouth with robotic gestures. She easily picked a full plate clean, wiped her lips with a napkin, and murmured admiringly:

“Delicious.”

“Seriously...?”

Trusting in Astarte’s words, Kojou hardened his resolve and stretched a hand

toward some food. Celesta, too, took some with her utensils.

“...It really is delicious.”

Though Kojou could hardly believe it, Nina’s cooking was exquisite. It was a little on the spicy side, but it felt good on the tongue, with a miraculously strong, pleasant taste spreading throughout his mouth. Those weird ingredients of mysterious origin had turned into something far tastier than Kojou could have anticipated.

“Mmm. Certainly, the taste is all right.”

After providing her own commentary, even the foul-tongued Celesta fell into silence.

“But of course. ’Twas I who supervised, after all.”

Nina, in the embrace of Kanon’s lap, triumphantly thrust out her chest. Kanon and Yukina, who had done the actual cooking, were in very high spirits as well.

“Senpai, if you like, I’ll get you more salad,” Yukina said, taking the now-empty plate from Kojou’s hands.

“Ah...thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Also, senpai, you have sauce on your chin.”

“Huh? I do?”

“Yes, I will wipe it off.”

Yukina wiped Kojou’s dirty face clean with all the care of a newlywed bride. Celesta stared with half-lidded eyes, as if the sight of them being so intimate was deeply disconcerting.

“Hey...Plain Girl. What is your relationship to this pervert...? Are you dating him?”

“Eh...?!”

Celesta’s ill-mannered question made Yukina’s voice go shrill.

Kojou looked back at Celesta in visible annoyance. He felt like he’d been asked a similar question roughly twenty-four hours earlier.

“That ain’t the case at all, Box Girl.”

“That’s right. I am merely his watcher!”

“What the—? I don’t get it.”

Celesta glared, shaking her head at Kojou’s and Yukina’s perfectly harmonious rebuttals. Watching it all from the side, Nina and Astarte made silent double nods in apparent agreement with Celesta.

“Well, not that it matters to me,” tediously murmured Celesta. “So are the two of you retainers of Lord Vattler?”

“Why do I have to be a retainer for a guy like that?” Kojou objected. “Don’t even say that as a joke.” Goose bumps broke out over his entire body.

Celesta tapered her lips, quietly voicing her visible displeasure. “You’re not? Then, why would Lord Vattler entrust me to your care?”

“Well, that’s what I wanna know...,” Kojou bitterly muttered to himself.

Having finally awakened, Celesta had no memory, and Vattler had yet to contact any of them. Just as before, the true intent of the Warlord’s Empire aristocrat remained a mystery. But...

“Common sense would dictate that he sent you to Kojou because ’tis the safest place.”

It was Nina who stated the facts in a fairly placid tone.

Celesta’s eyes widened in visible amazement.

“Safest? At this pervert’s side?” she questioned.

“I said I ain’t a pervert!”

Kojou rudely brushed away the right hand Celesta was pointing at him.

Celesta glared at Kojou from point-blank range. “You’re the one who touched my breasts!”

“That’s because you latched on to me all on your own!”

“Ah...!”

The instant Kojou glared right back at Celesta, Yukina’s voice trickled out as if

she'd just found something she had dropped on the floor.

"Himeragi?"

"What is it, Plain Girl?"

Kojou and Celesta simultaneously looked at Yukina, perplexed. However, Yukina made no reply. Her head remained lowered a little as she murmured like she was questioning herself.

"I see... So that is it... I should have realized sooner."

"Realized what? Something regarding this human scum's acts of depravity?"

"I already said I didn't touch you intentionally!"

"No, never mind that. After all, I understood from the start that senpai is an indecent person."

Yukina shook her head with indifference. Kojou instantly became indignant.

"Why's that?!"

"Never mind that, senpai. I mean the reason the Duke of Ardeal entrusted Celesta to you. Save the First Primogenitor, the Lost Warlord, he probably acknowledges only you as possessing combat capability equal to or above that of his own— Correct, senpai?"

"Well, you might be right about that..."

It was a fact he didn't really want to admit, but Kojou nodded nonetheless.

To Vattler, a battle maniac, the only thing that attracted his interest was power. Though it was difficult to clearly peg the man as friend or foe, at the very least, he was someone who acknowledged other parties' worth in battle. That accounted for his bizarre attachment to Kojou—or more precisely, the blood of the Fourth Primogenitor that Kojou had inherited.

"I presume that the Duke of Ardeal believes that none other than you can protect Celesta, senpai, which is why he entrusted her to you," Yukina stated in a sober, serious tone. The very simplicity of her hypothesis made it all the more convincing.

Whatever his appearances, Vattler was a lord of his own nation, with a large

number of loyal subordinates like Jagan. If there was a reason for him to entrust Celesta to Kojou, and not his own subordinates, it could only be because the special power Kojou possessed was necessary: the strength of the Fourth Primogenitor—the World’s Mightiest Vampire.

But simultaneously, Yukina’s assertion made another fact clear.

“That means someone’s after Celesta, right?” Kojou’s expression hardened.

“Yes. Though, in the end, it is only a hypothesis...” Yukina nodded gravely.

Hearing this, the color of Celesta’s face became starkly pale. After all, Yukina’s thought fit Celesta’s last memory.

Vattler had saved Celesta when she was on the brink of being killed. And Vattler had sent the girl he had saved to Kojou, likely to protect Celesta from harm...

“—Concern is unnecessary. The Fourth Primogenitor will protect you,” Astarte declared without emotion.

It was rare for the homunculus girl to personally voice something that was not precise information.

“Yes. Akatsuki saved me as well,” Kanon added with a reserved smile.

“I—I am not actually worried. I’ll be fine even without someone like this pervert protecting me,” Celesta retorted with halting words, turning her face away as if she was blushing. Then, as if to alter the course of the conversation, she righted her posture and said, “Kanon, was it? What do you think of this man?”

“Akatsuki? I have always liked him.” Kanon tilted her head like a little bird.

Kojou’s food stopped in his throat, nearly choking him; the fork in Yukina’s hand audibly fell to the table. Astarte continued “eating” with a neutral look on her face, seemingly failing to notice that her plate had been empty for some time.

“I-is that so?” Celesta pressed without a hint of venom in her voice.

Kanon nodded with vigor and said, “Yes. I love Akatsuki—and Yukina and Nagisa and Astarte.”

“Ah... Th-that is what you meant...” The exchange had clearly drained Celesta’s energy. “Don’t say misleading things like that.”

Limply, Kojou and Yukina lowered their faces in the same way. “What about me?” said Nina, crossing her arms in dissatisfaction at being the only one whose name had not been included.

Then, for some reason, they heard a rattle, which gave them a sense that someone had stumbled, perhaps on the apartment’s veranda. It was a faint sign, one that could, on any given day, be easily dismissed as the mind playing tricks.

However, Yukina reacted instantly.

She drew her silver spear from its case, propped up against the wall, poising it with a fluid motion. The folded triple blade deployed, and the fully metallic shaft slid to its full length.

The blade, reacting to the ritual energy coursing through it, emitted a pale glow.

“—Snowdrift Wolf!”

Yukina sharply invoked the spear’s proper name.

“Nwaa?!”

Kojou, finding the tip of the spear turned toward him, reflexively ducked. Celesta, too, curled up in a ball. Yukina rushed past, sending a sidelong sweep of the spear grazing just above their heads.

Yukina’s spear, dubbed Snowdrift Wolf, was the secret weapon of the Lion King Agency, able to nullify demonic energy and rend any barrier. The dazzling glow of the Divine Oscillation Effect swept toward a corner of the veranda.

“Howuuaa?!”

The next instant, they heard the nervous voice of a girl coming from the veranda.

A figure unexpectedly appeared, together with a shower of sparks from her destroyed magical barrier.

She was a young woman, her entire body shrouded in a white robe. She bore an ornamented silver long sword, and a white hood concealed her face.

Under the robe, she was wearing a military uniform modified to be sleeveless and miniskirted. If the first impression she gave off could be summed up simply, it was like a foreigner who'd gotten ninja cosplay all wrong. And it was such a curious foreigner clinging to the apartment's veranda, observing Kojou and the others.

"Wh-who are...?"

Naturally, the intruder's most eccentric attire brought an expression of bewilderment over even Yukina's face. No doubt she never expected a fake ninja like this to breach the anti-intrusion ward she had placed herself.

"Oh-ho... Magical camouflage."

In contrast, Nina murmured with visible amusement. She was staring at the white robe covering the intruder. A complex magical circle was embedded right onto its surface. It was an extremely high-end military camouflage suit for concealing the wearer, magically obstructing detection by others. Had Snowdrift Wolf not destroyed the robe's functionality, they likely would never have been able to set eyes upon her.

"...!"

Judging that the intruder's equipment made her a threat, Yukina put her guard back up. Seeing this flustered the intruder.

"P-please wait—Miss Sword Shaman! I have no intention of harming thee!"

These words spoken, the intruder stripped off the robe covering her. The hood was lowered to reveal a young woman, her silver hair cropped short in military fashion. She seemed to be about twenty years old. Kojou recognized her face.

"Ah...! Right, you're that girl who was working for La Folia—!"

"Yes. Interceptor Knight Kataya Justina of the Aldegian Knights of the Second Coming. Nin!"

When Kojou indicated the intruder, she clasped her hands flat together and

bowed her head in supplication. Without thinking, Kojou nodded his head as well. The “ninja girl” was a knight serving the Aldegian royal family. Her mission was to protect Kanon Kanase, a member of that family.

Supposedly, she was a fan of Japanese ninjas, remaining inconspicuous and concealed from sight as she protected Kanon.

“N-Nin?”

With Justina like that, Yukina stood stiff, staring at her. Thanks to adopting such a serious combat posture, she seemed unable to find a proper time to lower her spear.

“I see... So this is the first time you’ve met her, Himeragi.”

Kojou spoke the words with a tone of sympathy for the Sword Shaman.

Her spear still raised, Yukina awkwardly shifted her gaze toward Kojou alone.

“Senpai, do you know her?”

“Well, kinda. She’s the bodyguard La Folia assigned to Kanase. So I don’t think she’s a suspicious person. Just a ninja fangirl.”

“By thy will.”

Saying this, Justina courteously bowed. Celesta gazed upon her in visible admiration and remarked, “So ninjas really do exist...”

“Well, she’s sort of a ninja, but this is just the princess of Aldegia having her take on the role...” Kojou tried to correct her in vague language.

Naturally, Kanon, who hadn’t been informed of Justina’s existence, had a look of bewilderment come over her at the sudden appearance of her own bodyguard.

“Er, Miss Justina, would you like to eat with us?” she offered.

Justina bowed her head, looking deeply moved as she said, “I am most honored to receive the Royal Sister’s hospitality—however, I must first inform Sir Fourth Primogenitor of something with the greatest urgency.”

“Huh...? Me?” Kojou sensed an ill omen. “What is it now?”

Justina lifted her gaze—the fickle look from a moment before had vanished.

Her face was that of a trained soldier.

“I am sorry. I should have alerted you sooner, but this apartment building has been surrounded.”

“What?!”

“They are well trained. Without the aid of a spy satellite, I would likely never have detected them, either.”

“Spy satellite...?”

Aldegia’s even using a thing like that to protect Kanon, Kojou thought, flabbergasted. But at that moment, even those girls being unreasonable was oddly reassuring.

“The enemy likely numbers four. However, their target is not the Royal Sister but rather—”

“—Celesta!”

Kojou instinctively realized it.

As if waiting for that as a signal, he was assailed by the oppressive sensation of powerful demonic energy.

The apartment shook from an incredible impact before he realized they were under attack.

Seeing this, Celesta opened her mouth as if to silently scream, signaling that their peace and quiet had come to an end...



CHAPTER THREE
DEITY OF DARKNESS

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1

Yukina was the first to move.

A misshapen figure emerged as metal fragments of the pulverized door scattered about. Before the sight fully entered her vision, she leaped, slamming a powerful, ritual energy–infused heel kick into it.

“—Roaring Thunder!!”

The intruder’s large-framed body recoiled, accompanied by the dull sound of a jawbone breaking.

The intruder turned out to be a leopard-headed beast man over two meters in height. The palm strike Yukina subsequently unleashed sent the demon, nearly four times her body weight, flying.

“Justina, protect Kanase! Astarte, take care of Celesta!”

Kojou reacted a moment later. In spite of the urgent emergency posed by the demon’s attack, he fretted a little that he was getting entirely too used to these things.

“By thy will!”

“Accepted.”

Justina and Astarte moved, responding to Kojou’s voice. He considered their replies, both equally out of place, all the more reassuring under the circumstances.

“Please be careful, senpai. This is probably a diversion,” Yukina cautioned while glaring at the fallen beast man.

Kojou instantly looked behind him.

“Diversion?! So that’s a decoy op? Then that means—”

He saw the shadow of a second beast man silhouette behind the lace curtain of the living room window. Kojou noticed that around the same time the glass window cracked and shattered.

“—this is the main event!”

Kojou counterattacked against the second beast man leaping in with a large swing and a straight right jab. However, that mighty blow sailed fruitlessly, hitting nothing but air.

“What the—?!”

“An illusion?! A beast man using spells?!”

A look of shock came over Yukina as she watched Kojou stagger. Kojou had tried to punch an illusion created via sorcery. The real one, standing behind the illusion, laughed, his fangs crudely bared.

Cases of beast men, possessing extremely high combat capability to begin with, going out of their way to learn spell casting were few and far between. But among certain tribes, a precious few possessed such special abilities innately. Many were called a superior breed, and it was known that these retained great power in a completely different league than normal beast men. It was this that was the cause of Yukina’s surprise.

With Kojou heavily off balance before his eyes, the second beast man swung up with oversized claws. And with Kojou targeted, it was a silver-haired female knight who leaped to shield him.

“Sir Kojou, get down!”

Justina drew the sword she carried on her hip. Kojou did as told and rolled onto the floor. The silver light clashed with the demonic energy—enveloping the beast man’s arm just over his head.

It was the beast man who howled as fresh blood sprayed about.

The slice from Justine’s blade deflected the left arm the beast man was slamming downward and proceeded to dig deep into his chest. The wound was

enveloped in a pale flame; the beast man raised his voice in agony.

“Whoa...”

Kojou exhaled in admiration. Even his amateur eyes could tell at a glance that Justine’s swordsmanship was top-notch. She would probably outdo Yukina in a contest of pure swordsmanship. It doubly explained why La Folia dispatched her to protect Kanon, a member of the royal family. She was far more than a simple foreign-born ninja fangirl.

“This is the treasured sword Nidaros, granted unto me by Princess La Folia. It is said to grant maidens serving at the Aldegian royal family’s side destructive might and the blessing of healing.”

Justine proudly raised the long sword. The blade, adorned with a golden hilt, glowed with an ethereal blue flame. It looked a little like the pseudo-holy sword La Folia wielded.

She’s borrowing Kanon’s spiritual energy, Kojou realized. The spiritual energy Kanon possessed, close to an angel’s, was deadly poison as far as demons were concerned.

“Both of you, please do not move.”

Yukina held her silver spear as she sharply addressed the two beast men. The tip of her poised spear was pointed at the throat of the first beast man on the floor.

“I believe further combat would be fruitless, but do you wish to continue?” she asked.

“...”

The beast man growled through the jaw Yukina had broken. He pressed on, speaking in a raspy, hard-to-hear voice.

“We want the...Ciate girl back.”

“...!”

Celesta drew in her breath, visibly afraid.

To the girl with no memory, the beast men’s attack represented the fear of

being chased by a past she could not recall. Without knowing why they were after her, all she could do was tremble in anxiety-induced anguish.

“She is the icon of Zazalamagiu; raised by our hands. She belongs to us.”

The beast man glared up at Celesta with bloodshot eyes. Yukina gripped her spear harder.

As if covering for the fearful Celesta, Kojou defiantly rebutted, “Well, it looks like she doesn’t remember either of you.”

His voice was thick with unbridled rage.

“And if you really were Celesta’s friends, you could’ve just come to the front door and met her there, right? That you didn’t is practically the same as shouting, ‘We’re the bad guys!’”

“...I had meant to grant foreigners mercy, but...”

The beast man chuckled quietly. The odd composure of the intruders, who should’ve been beaten with their backs to the wall, put Kojou on guard. A moment later, Justina shrieked. The beast man she had her sword trained on unleashed an explosive swell of demonic energy, its shock wave slamming her against the wall.

“...Justina?! What’s with this guy...?!” Kojou shouted as the bizarre spectacle struck his eyes.

The body of the beast man, already pretty huge to begin with, swelled to over twice its previous size and proceeded to change shape—from humanoid to complete beast. He transformed into a malevolent leopard, reaching four to five meters in length.

“No, it can’t be—divine bestialization?!”

The beast man Yukina had her spear pointed toward underwent an identical change. His enlarged frame demolished the apartment’s floor and ceiling. Even Snowdrift Wolf’s ability to nullify demonic energy was unable to stop the transformation—for the change was no illusion wrought by sorcery.

Divine bestialization was a special ability possessed by a scant few at the utmost pinnacle among the beast-men tribes. This was Yukina’s first encounter

with it in person.

At the cost of incredible exertion diminishing their very life spans, top-level beast men could transform their bodies into divine beasts, beings on par with the phoenix and dragons of mythology. Their combat capabilities were said to surpass even vampires' Beast Vassals.

"Invoking right of self-defense in protection of Celesta Ciate. Execute, Rhododactylos."

When Astarte stood up, stripping off the white gown over her, wings of demonic energy spread from her back. These transformed into a fist from a giant Beast Vassal, swinging down at the face of the second divine beast.

The atmosphere creaked from the collision of vast demonic energies. However, it was Astarte who was staggered by the recoil. The man-made Beast Vassal implanted into her body was powerful indeed, but Astarte, the host, was herself nothing more than a homunculus girl with a frail body. There was no way she could endure the oppressive might of two divine beasts.

"Astarte?! Shit... Himeragi, take care of everyone!"

"Senpai?! What are you—?!"

Kojou slid past the feet of the divine beast at the entrance and proceeded to wrap around the foe's back. If his timing had been off by even a second, he would have been stomped on by the divine beast's huge body, likely resulting in a fatality. Yukina was rooted in place, dumbfounded at Kojou's action, rash even by his standards.

However, Kojou didn't have any attention to spare for that. He was wholly occupied controlling the vast demonic energy released by his own flesh and blood.

Seizing the angle so that the two divine beasts were in a straight line, he thrust both hands forward. He concentrated his own power in the meager space created between his hands. He was summoning but a single portion of a Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor, boasting overwhelming demonic energy of its own. It was the only way to overcome this dangerous situation.

"C'mon over, Al-Nasl Minium!"

Kojou summoned the Beast Vassal of wild, raging shock waves.

The Beast Vassal was a giant bicorn reaching ten-odd meters in length, but Kojou channeled its demonic energy alone to unleash a bullet of highly concentrated shock waves. It was viable in theory, but he had no way to know if he could pull it off until he tried it. It was a dangerous gamble—failure might result in the deaths of everyone present. Even so, Kojou didn't have the time to worry.

“Snowdrift Wolf—!”

“Defense mode. Execute, Rhododactylos.”

Yukina and Astarte moved simultaneously, realizing what Kojou was doing. The Divine Oscillation Effects released by the two girls formed defensive barriers hemming in Kojou's attack.

With the barriers deployed by Yukina and Astarte fulfilling the role of a cannon barrel, Kojou condensed and fired his demonic energy. The two divine beasts, bearing the brunt of the shock wave cannonball, were blown away, shot straight out of the apartment.

“Shit... Still too soon to completely control it, huh?!”

Kojou breathed raggedly as he pressed his two bloodied arms against himself, the blood vessels wrecked. He groaned in agony as the back of his brain seemed to boil—the cost of wielding such potent demonic energy.

“How can you do something so reckless...?! Using one of your Beast Vassals in cramped quarters such as this!”

Falling limply to one knee, Yukina raised her eyebrows as she glared at Kojou.

If Kojou had failed to control the Beast Vassal, the apartment would surely have been annihilated, and everything in the area with it. It was natural for Yukina, aware of that danger, to fly into a rage.

“There wasn't any other way!”

Such was Kojou's frail retort. With their backs against the wall, facing off against two divinely bestialized foes, it was a fact that he had no room to be picky. Even if they were divine beasts with powerful demonic energy, they'd

taken a direct hit from a Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor. He didn't think they'd emerge unscathed.

But as if to betray his hopes, Kojou heard the howls of the two divine beasts outside the shattered window. When Kojou leaped onto the half-destroyed veranda, he saw enormous leopards glaring back at them, standing on the apartment building next door.

"They shrugged that off—?! You gotta be kidding," he uttered unintentionally.

The two divine beasts were intact. He would not go as far as to say unscathed, but they had not lost their combat capability. Kojou's attack with restrained demonic energy had failed to defeat them.

"It is said that a foe with divine bestialization has power greater than a vampire's Beast Vassals!" Even Yukina couldn't contain her concern. "The cost is correspondingly high, and to begin with, almost no beast-man bloodlines remain powerful enough to divine bestialize... To think that two would appear simultaneously...!"

Enormous demonic energy welled up within the bodies of both divinely bestialized beast men. They intended to unleash a breath attack. The condensed demonic energy flames would likely annihilate Kojou, the apartment, and everyone else. Of course, Celesta, their objective, would not escape unscathed either, but their anger at being harmed had made the divine beasts lose their sense of reason.

"This is bad," Kojou muttered, his expression freezing over. "Well, obviously I can't use my Beast Vassals anymore!"

"Of course not!" Yukina shouted and glared at him.

Each and every one of the Fourth Primogenitor's Beast Vassals were simply too powerful. Fundamentally, they were not the kind of things you summoned in an urban area.

On top of that, Kojou's strength was heavily depleted thanks to the reckless summoning from a moment ago. Certainly, summoning a new Beast Vassal would protect them from the breath attack, but there was no telling what a Beast Vassal running amok might do in the course of its rampage.

“—Both of you, stand back.”

The nervous Kojou and Yukina heard a strangely confident voice from behind.

The speaker was a little doll not even reaching thirty centimeters in height. Still carried against Kanon’s chest, she proudly touched her hands to her hips.

“...Nina? What can you do in a body like that...?!”

Kojou stared at the impetuous smile of the self-proclaimed Great Alchemist of Yore with a dubious expression.

As a result of the previous battle with Wiseman, she’d lost the majority of her power. In the first place, an alchemist’s objective was to seek ultimate truths—combat was not her forte. Kojou didn’t think she could battle powerful divine beasts in her present state. However...

“They ruined the cooking I had poured my soul into. Naturally, they must pay a commensurate price—”

With that said, Nina turned one tiny hand toward each divine beast.

Kojou felt an instinctive fear of the dazzling glow sprouting from her fingertips. After all, Kojou had witnessed that glow before firsthand.

It was not the light of a simple spell. It was the dangerous radiance produced from transmuting matter via alchemy. The discharge of a pale thunderbolt spiraled into an enormous cannon barrel before Nina’s eyes.

“Fear not. I shall not slay them. Kanon, I shall borrow your spiritual energy!”

“Yes, director!”

With Kanon supplementing Nina’s insufficient magical energy, the alchemist unleashed beams from both hands.

It was a heavy metal particle beam bombardment, scattering incredible heat and vast electromagnetic waves in its wake. An incandescent blade of light that could slice a giant ocean ferry in two—

The bombardment, reaching close to the speed of light, punched separately through the two divine beasts’ bodies.

Their cries of anguish made the very air shudder.

“Hmm. So they escaped...”

By the time the last vestiges of the beams faded, the divine beasts had vanished, nowhere to be seen. Heavily wounded from their pummeling by the particle cannon, they’d no doubt made a run for it.

“Wh-why you...”

Kojou, grimacing from the scent of beam-created ozone, gave an exhausted sigh.

Certainly, with a precise beam attack, one could snipe at the divine beasts alone without inflicting damage on nearby residential homes. That said, he didn’t think any relatively sane person would fire off a particle cannon in an urban area. Nina Adelard was the Great Alchemist of Yore, some two hundred and seventy years young—it seemed that she, too, was a being far adrift from notions of common sense.

“So...uh, what are we gonna do with this...?”

Kojou looked behind him, muttering in a somewhat detached tone.

Even in the gentlest language possible, Yukina’s apartment could only be described as a hot mess. The causes were the two beast men’s onslaught and Kojou’s counterattack to expel them. The flooring tiles were curled up, the walls were cracked, and not even a trace remained of either the glass window or the veranda. The few pieces of furniture that had been smashed to bits lay scattered over the floor. It looked like the place had been struck by a cruise missile. Clearly, it was not in a livable condition.

Seeing this for herself, Yukina folded up her spear, sighing deeply.

“What will I do now—?”

She looked up at Kojou with a rare forlorn look.

2

The next day, on the second day of winter vacation—

Kojou awoke to an ear-splitting roar and accompanying vibration.

“Whoa!”

Despite waking up instantly, he clutched his groggy head, genuinely confused.

He was atop his own familiar bed. Aside from the cracks in the window glass, there wasn't anything particularly out of place. However, the tremors shaking the entire room were probably not figments of Kojou's imagination. Through the wall, he could hear the sound of a hammer drill in the next room over.

“I see. They're repairing Yukina's room... Wait, this early in the morning...?”

Checking his clock, Kojou dragged himself out of bed, his shoulders falling.

Apparently, the Lion King Agency had arranged for the immediate repair of Yukina's apartment, which had been damaged in the beast-man raid. He'd been told that no expense would be spared on the rush job to restore the apartment before Nagisa got back from the mainland.

Yukina herself didn't have much for clothing or belongings, and these had apparently escaped damage. Supposedly, fixtures and cookware identical to those destroyed had already been ordered. Magical camouflage was being used to conceal it, and hypnotic suggestions had dealt with the neighbors' memories, covering all bases.

The one remaining problem was where Yukina would be staying for the week or so until the construction was finished. Well, it had *been* a problem—

“Good morning, senpai.”

Stepping out of his own room, Kojou bumped into Yukina, Snowdrift Wolf in hand. For once, she wore something other than a school uniform. Her hairstyle was different than usual, too. It was an unguarded hairstyle with nothing more than a hair tie holding it together. Gently placing her spear upon the floor, she tensely lowered her head.

“Er, thank you for allowing me to stay here last night.”

“S-sure... Well, couldn't help it with all that happened. Couldn't have Celesta sleeping in an apartment without even a proper glass window, either...”

“Th-that is true.”

Kojou and Yukina kept their gazes oddly averted as they spoke, breaking into

an awkward laugh.

Yukina and Celesta, lacking anywhere else to go, had ended up staying at the Akatsuki residence. Given that Celesta was with them, they had nothing special to be concerned about, but seeing one another so early in the morning gave Kojou a creeping feeling nonetheless. He was oddly conscious of getting a glimpse into Yukina's private life, something of which he was normally unaware.



“Come to think of it, where’s Celesta? Still asleep?”

Kojou looked around the apartment and forced a change of subject. Yukina returned her spear to its case as she shook her head and said, “No, she’s—”

Without finishing, she shifted her gaze to the dining table.

Atop the table was a row of plates with a variety of what appeared to be homemade dishes. There was fish-and-shellfish soup, marinade, and tortillas packed with meat and vegetables. They were probably dishes from Celesta’s homeland. The way she’d arranged the ingredients by hand made them look delicious.

“Celesta made all this?” Kojou asked, surprised.

Celesta, standing bored at the back of the kitchen, leaned her face over the counter and challenged, “What, you got a problem with that?”

“Nah, it’s amazing.”

Kojou voiced his honest admiration. For some reason, the foreign girl tapered her lips as if she had been mildly insulted.

“Somehow, I remembered how to make this. If I’m going to be staying here, I should at least cook the food. And if I leave it to you and end up eating something weird, it’ll just put me in a bind. It’s also good practice for when I make something for Lord Vattler to eat.”

“...So what, we’re his official food tasters now?” Kojou murmured, feeling a little put off by Celesta’s final comment.

For her part, Celesta pointed at the sink faucet with an odd glimmer in her eyes as she said, “But this thing is really convenient. With one switch you get a flame, just turn a lever and water flows out... Though when water came gushing out of the toilet, I was at a loss about what to do.”

“...Setting the toilet aside, I’m surprised—it’s rare not to have gas and running water. Is your homeland really that backward a place?”

“I don’t know. I can’t remember it,” Celesta retorted in visible displeasure.

I guess not, Kojou seemed to say with a shrug.

Yukina had probably helped her out, too, but since she'd used unfamiliar cooking devices to make such good food, he could only surmise that Celesta's cooking skills were remarkable.

Genuinely grateful, Kojou dug right in. The beast men's trespassing had spoiled supper, so he hadn't had a bite to eat since the night before. Thanks to that, his hunger was ferocious. Celesta and Yukina sat as well, the three of them beginning their unusual breakfast.

"Hey...what was with those guys last night anyway?"

Just when Kojou was bringing a piece of food to his lips, Celesta spoke offhandedly, as if she'd just remembered something. With the very spicy tabasco still stuffing his cheeks to the brim, Kojou shook his head.

"Who knows? I don't think you need to worry about it too much, though," he mumbled.

"What's with you? You think it's not my problem?" Celesta rested a cheek on her hand, glaring at Kojou in a visible sulk.

"It's not that—how they went about it was pretty nuts, but they came to get you back 'cause they need you. If that's the case, then you don't have to worry about them hurting you, right?"

"Well, that might be true, but what are you two going to do? If they attack again..."

Watching Celesta, still looking at the table as she murmured, Kojou blinked, mystified.

"...Don't tell me you're worried about me?"

"Excuse me? As if. Why don't you go and die for all I care?"

Celesta glared at Kojou with cold eyes as though she was looking at some vile insect.

Kojou made a slightly hurt expression as he bit down on a tortilla and said, "Oh, shut up. Anyway, that'd be wasting worry on us. Just look at what happened yesterday. Himeragi and I can protect ourselves, at least. Vattler thinks so, that's why he left you with me."

“Call him Lord, you shit-eating insect.”

“Why you...”

Celesta and Kojou traded malicious glares across the dining table. Watching this, Yukina silently thrust the knife in her hand into the mass of meat at the center of the table. The quarreling pair stopped, frozen in fear. Seeing this for herself, Yukina exhaled a little.

“I believe it is likely there will be no further attempts to take Celesta. Our foes have surely realized the Fourth Primogenitor is guarding her, and the Lion King Agency is on the move as well,” Yukina concluded.

That beast men capable of divine bestialization had illegally entered Itogami Island was a fairly significant issue. Hence, the Lion King Agency had sent its own specialized investigators. Of course, the Island Guard was doubtlessly on the case as well. The beast men had gone from being the hunters to the hunted.

“And if they do come after you again, maybe we can find out what they know about you. Shouldn’t that put your mind at ease a little?” Kojou remarked bluntly, making Celesta stare at him in mild surprise. Apparently, it was very unexpected for Kojou to show her such consideration.

“Come to think of it, what’d they say—the icon of Zalalamasala or something...” Kojou tried to recall the beast men’s words. They had referred to her as an icon—an icon they had raised themselves.

“Zazalamagiu,” Yukina corrected.

“Hey, I wasn’t that far off.” Kojou grimaced. “You know anything about that, Himeragi?”

Yukina shook her head. Apparently, it was a name even she, a Sword Shaman, had not heard before.

“But normally an icon refers to objects within which a deity resides, such as a sacred tree or boulder, weapons, and sacred shrine objects. Aside from that, it is a term sometimes used for a priestess who calls down a god.”

“...She’s...a priestess...?”

Kojou turned to Celesta in surprise. *You got a problem with that?* said the

half-lidded gaze Celesta shot back.

“So maybe she’s a spiritualist like you and Kanon, Himeragi?”

“I do not know. Right now, I can only say...that is possible...” Yukina vaguely shook her head.

Kojou partially understood the cause of her bewilderment. Beast men in the divine bestialization class were far more precious than any mere spiritualist; that fact was throwing Yukina off. The pros and cons of exposing two precious, high-ranking beast men to secure a single spiritualist weren’t aligned in Yukina’s mind.

Kojou took out his cell phone and tried running an online search for Zazalamagiu, but it didn’t produce any hits. He tried altering the spelling several times, but the results remained the same.

“In the end, the fastest way to settle this would be to get in touch with Vattler somehow...” Kojou sighed with an unenthused expression.

Celesta glared sidelong at Kojou and spat, “I said, call him Lord, would you—!”

“Like hell I will!”

As Kojou glared back, lighthearted music suddenly emanated from his person. It was his cell phone’s ringtone.

“Wh...what the...?”

Celesta shrank, staring at the cell phone in visible fear. To her, surprised at seeing gas stoves and running water, a cell phone was surely a menacing piece of super-advanced technology.

Heedless of Celesta, Kojou took the phone in hand when...

“—Kojou?! Are you all right?!”

As soon as the line opened, he heard Asagi’s voice, vaguely tense with urgency. At a loss, Kojou stared at the phone.

“...Huh?”

“Don’t ‘huh’ me! I heard a bomb went off at your apartment building! When I looked on a surveillance camera, there was a crazy-big hole!”

“What are you doing looking at my building with a surveillance camera, geez...,” Kojou groaned in a low-pitched voice. “You hacked stuff again, didn’t you?”

Apparently, the Lion King Agency’s concealment measures could not best Asagi’s information-gathering ability.

“Well, fine. Anyway, relax; I’m okay. It wasn’t my place that got blown up; it was Himeragi’s.”

“...Huh?! Himeragi? Wait, what the hell? What’s going on?”

Asagi raised her voice in apparent confusion. Kojou sighed listlessly.

“We don’t get much of it, either. Beast men suddenly attacked, and in the end, they ran off, so...”

“...Beast men... Don’t tell me you two stuck your noses into another weird incident?”

“Hey, it’s not like I wanna get wrapped up in these things... Oh yeah, Asagi. Do you know anything about Zazamalagila?”

“Uh, what? Zalaralagi? That some spell in a video game?”

Asagi’s voice turned displeased at Kojou’s question. Perhaps she thought he was dodging the question. Yukina corrected him silently, mouthing *Zazalamagiu*.

“Sorry, I got it wrong. Zazalamagiu. The name of some icon and some priestess and stuff.”

“I haven’t heard of it, but what about it?”

Asagi still seemed a bit suspicious.

Kojou tried to sound casual. “Er, I sort of wanted to know about it... Couldn’t find anything on the Net, though.”

“Hmmm... I’ll be at my corp part-time job in the afternoon, so if you need me to, I can look then.”

“Sorry, could you, then?” Kojou asked, his faint hopes riding on it.

The Gigafloat Management Corporation’s database archived exacting

information on the Demon Sanctuary that was not available to the public. The odds were high that a clue about the icon of Zazalamagiu could be found there.

“That’s fine, but you’re gonna owe me for this, you know?”

Asagi stated that in a buoyant voice, seemingly driving a nail into the careless Kojou. It was in a joking tone, but Kojou knew well enough that he couldn’t laugh it off.

“Yeah, yeah... So is that all you wanted?”

“W-well, yeah... This isn’t really a big deal, but Nagisa’s with family right now, isn’t she?”

“Yeah, since yesterday.”

If anything, the sudden softening of Asagi’s demeanor made Kojou feel tenser. Perhaps a mixture of past experiences and vampiric intuition was warning him of impending danger.

“What are you doing for meals, Kojou? If you’re in a bind, I can go over and make something.”

“Wait... You cook?” Kojou’s breath caught.

Even by the most generous assessment, Asagi’s cooking skill was a weapon of culinary destruction. Kojou, despite being an unaging, undying vampire, wouldn’t be safe after eating her cooking and would likely be unable to move the next day.

“What’s with that anxious reaction...?” Asagi lowered her voice.

Kojou felt acute nervousness as he shook his head and said, “N-nah, thanks for the sentiment, but I’m all right. I’ve got meals covered for now, so—”

“Hold on a sec. There’s a hole from an explosion in Himeragi’s place, right?”

Asagi’s grave tone made it seem like she’d suddenly realized something very important.

“—So where did she stay last night...?”

“Well... For now, she’s staying at my place... I mean, neighbors have to help each other in a pinch, right...?”

Kojou's voice became shriller as he desperately made an excuse. Asagi was silent for a brief time.

"So even though Nagisa's not there, you have another girl staying over with you... Hmm... I see. That means she's cooking your meals, too?"

"No, it's not Himeragi making the food, it's another girl, so, ah...just relax."

Kojou testified to the plain facts. That instant, he heard the strange sound of something breaking on the other end of the line. It was probably the sound of Asagi's cell phone cracking, unable to bear the power of her grip.

"That's even worse! What are you thinking?! Go die, you idiot!"

Asagi shouted and hung up. Kojou put a hand on his ear, annoyed. Thanks to Asagi's loud voice, his eardrum hurt. Yukina covered her eyes in silence.

"That hurt. What's she so angry about...?"

"Senpai..."

Staring at Kojou's expression of dismay, Yukina let out an exasperated sigh.

3

After finishing breakfast, Kojou and the others immediately headed for Island West, a commercial district where restaurants and shopping malls and so forth were gathered together—Itogami Island's very own downtown.

Their reasons were not particularly good ones; if Kojou had to explain, their objectives were sightseeing and shopping. Further to the point, they couldn't stay at the apartment because the construction noises from the Himeragi residence were rather severe. Besides, there was also the fact that they couldn't have Celesta continuing to wear one of Kojou's T-shirts indefinitely. Having Celesta, with a rather curvaceous figure for her age, walk around lightly dressed was awkward—especially for Kojou.

"This is...Itogami Island?" Celesta murmured curiously as she looked at the glass-covered landscape around her.

They were on the topmost floor of a shopping mall—the restaurant floor. The

group was taking a break after finishing a brief shopping trip where they bought Celesta a change of clothes.

Celesta had picked out a pair of leather sandals and a short, colorful, embroidered dress. The vibrant color scheme, reminiscent of a distant culture, suited her rich brown skin very well. Thanks to her long, slender limbs and striking visage, anyone was likely to mistake her for a model on a magazine photo shoot.

If only her personality was even a little bit cute, Kojou couldn't help but think offhandedly.

"It seems squalid somehow. There are so many people, and it is so noisy..." Celesta grimaced as she voiced complaints about the scenery. Apparently, the futuristic landscape Itogami Island boasted did not make a very good impression on her.

"Well, I guess so," Kojou acknowledged. "That's because this is a commercial district. It's a little quieter in Island South and Island North, though."

"Hmm...what is that big building over there?"

Celesta pointed to the building standing at the center of the island. Even on the man-made island, the enormous, wedge-shaped building stood out from the rest.

"That's Keystone Gate, the center of Itogami Island. The airport and harbor are in that direction, so if you're gonna meet that Vattler guy, it'll probably be over there. Either way, we'll know pretty much right away when he comes back on that crazy-big ship of his."

"Ship?! Lord Vattler's?!"

Celesta's voice rose as she bit on the change of subject. Her easy-to-read demeanor elicited a slightly unpleasant look from Kojou.

"It's a cruise ship with the tasteless name of *Oceanus Grave II*," he said. "It's crazy decked out on the inside, though. The bath alone is about the size of this whole restaurant."

"You sound very familiar with it." Celesta gave him a look of displeasure.

Yukina, listening in silence until that point, noted, “Come to think of it, senpai, you’ve been in that bath on his ship, haven’t you? With Aiba.”

“W...wait a minute! Why do you know about that, Himeragi...?!”

Yukina’s testimony, bringing up a forgotten incident like an unexploded bomb, left Kojou thoroughly rocked. Of course, Kojou had no idea Yukina had used a *shikigami* to monitor that part of the night’s affairs from start to finish. Then, Celesta, the look on her face changing, pressed the point with Kojou.

“Why were *you* in Lord Vattler’s bath?! What kind of relationship do you two have?! Explain—in detail!”

“There were circumstances beyond my control! No way would I go in ‘cause I wanted to! In the first place, he’s my enemy! I’ve told you that time after time since yesterday!”

“What? Never mind that! Tell me more about Lord Vattler! What does he like to eat, what’s his favorite music, what’s his type of girl?”

“Is it just me, or did your goal switch at the end?!”

Kojou clicked his tongue with an exasperated look. Vattler didn’t have any interest in girls to begin with, but he couldn’t exactly tell Celesta that—

“...Well, I get why you’re hung up on Vattler, though. He is your one clue about who you are and all that. Even Asagi couldn’t tell me about that Zazalagiu thingy.”

“Zazalamagiu, senpai,” Yukina corrected once more, her tone resembling that of an old home tutor. “Please remember it already.”

Seeing Yukina and Kojou like that, Celesta watched him closely. “Hey, what are you two, really?”

“Ah?”

“You really aren’t retainers of Lord Vattler?”

“Pretty sure I said that from the start,” Kojou replied in an even tone.

At first glance, Vattler might have appeared to be a flawless, handsome young man, but in reality, he was a wily schemer with a fetish for battle. If Kojou had a

top-ten list of people he didn't want to work under, Vattler would be number one by a wide margin.

"Hmph." Celesta snorted in visible dismay as she asked, "Then, why are you looking after me like this?"

"That sure puts me on the spot... Do I really need a reason? It's not like we're doing that much."

"Well, beast men attacked, didn't they?" Celesta murmured. Her expression contorted in pain.

Because of her, Kojou and Yukina had come under attack. It was only then that Kojou realized Celesta had been secretly bothered that their lives had come into peril.

"It's not your fault they attacked. Plus, even if this was dumped into my lap, I dunno what I'd say to Vattler if I couldn't protect you."

"And you...Plain Girl. You're fine with this?"

"Me...?"

Yukina inclined her head, a little at a loss from the conversation suddenly bouncing her way.

Celesta's cheeks reddened a bit, and she averted her eyes as if it was something hard for her to say.

"I am sorry that because of me, your night together alone with Kojou was interrupted..."

"Wh-what are you saying?! J-just because it was only the two of us, it wasn't... like that..." Yukina shook her head with incredible vigor. She then cleared her throat and righted her posture. "I am merely senpai's watcher, after all. If anything, Celesta, it is my duty to watch over a dangerous individual like senpai to ensure he does not lay a hand upon you...!"

"Th-that so...? Th-thank you."

Celesta covered her own cleavage with both hands, putting a little distance between her and Kojou.

Kojou, finding his treatment as a dangerous person to be exceedingly irrational, raised his voice in protest. “Hold on! How’d this end up with you thanking Himeragi?!”

“Besides, I am somewhat concerned as to just what the Duke of Ardeal might have in mind,” Yukina murmured, completely ignoring Kojou’s objection.

A faint hint of worry crossed Celesta’s eyes. “What do you mean, concerned?”

“No, please pay no heed. I believe I am merely overthinking things.”

“O-okay.”

“Incidentally, senpai— Have you noticed?”

Yukina drew the case containing her spear closer as she spoke to Kojou quietly. Her expression looked less like it was guarded, and more like she was wholly at a loss.

“Huh?”

“It seems we have been tailed since a while earlier, but...”

“Ah.....that.”

Kojou gazed sidelong at a box seat near the restaurant’s entrance. Figures were sneaking peeks at the trio from the shadow of the translucent partition. The small size of the pair of silhouettes notably stood out.

“Well, I suppose we can’t just let them be.”

“I suppose not.”

Sighing together, Kojou and Yukina rose to their feet. They then proceeded toward the box seat. The stalker duo hurriedly ducked their heads, but that could not possibly suffice to hide them.

Kojou stared down at the two people huddled under the table, speaking with obvious weariness in his voice.

“What do you two think you’re doing...?”

“Ah...”

The stalkers raised their heads. One was a silver-haired, blue-eyed middle

school girl, and the other was a blue-haired homunculus girl. Both stood out even in the Demon Sanctuary. They were the two people most unsuited for covert surveillance.

“A-Akatsuki... Wh-what a coincidence...”

“Shock.”

Kanon Kanase and Astarte spoke with correspondingly forced tones of voice. Kojou snatched away the red plastic-framed glasses Kanon was wearing.

“Like it’s a coincidence you’re wearing these? What, is this supposed to be some sort of disguise?”

“Ah, g-give those back please...”

Kanon stretched her hands toward the glasses and whined. Nina, who Kanon had been holding against her chest, tumbled down as a result. Then, Yukina reached out with a hand, catching her a moment before she collided with the floor.

“Might you have come to keep an eye on Celesta?”

“Indeed. We thought we ought to keep watch so that Kojou does not lay a hand upon her,” Nina said in an all-too-pompous tone while she climbed onto Yukina’s shoulder.

“...Geez, it’s coming from all sides. What kind of guy do you think I am...?” Kojou murmured, hurt.

Certainly, Kojou had drank Yukina’s and Astarte’s blood, an act both Kanon and Nina had witnessed. However, in the end, those were emergency circumstances, situations where it could not be avoided. He absolutely didn’t assault girls indiscriminately.

Though, he himself was not ignorant that it sure looked like it—

“Come to think of it, did you ever get in touch with Natsuki?” Kojou asked.

“Affirmative. I reported the information concerning Miss Celesta,” Astarte replied.

The information came as a relief to Kojou.

“That so. What’d Natsuki say, then?”

“She said, ‘I am busy, you take care of it.’”

“What kind of reply is that?!”

Kojou’s relief turned into despair. He’d hoped that Natsuki, at least, would be able to do something about the crazy situation he was in, but that had apparently proved futile.

“Ah...” Kanon let out a little voice.

“Addendum. I have a message from Master to the Fourth Primogenitor,” Astarte calmly continued, gazing at the dejected Kojou, who lifted his face, his breath catching. It seemed that all hope might not yet be lost.

“Message? What?”

“That should you encounter the woman named Angelica Hermida, flee with all haste.”

“...Who’s that?” Kojou prompted.

However, the homunculus girl shook her head in silence. When Kojou shifted toward Yukina, she also silently shook her head. As he’d thought, apparently the name didn’t ring a bell with Yukina, either.

“Um...” Kanon spoke once more, timidly raising a hand.

“Run away if we meet her, she says... How do we do that when we don’t even know what she looks like...?” Kojou complained, conflicted.

No matter how much he thought about it, he couldn’t understand whatsoever why Natsuki had entrusted Astarte with such information.

The instructions—namely, to flee—also bothered him. Natsuki was well aware that Kojou was the so-called Fourth Primogenitor. In other words, Angelica Hermida was a fearsome enough foe that even the World’s Mightiest Vampire was unable to defeat her.

Nina, looking up to see Kojou starting to worry about it, suddenly spoke, interrupting his thoughts. “Incidentally, Kojou. The ‘flee’ part has been bothering me since earlier, but—”

“Where did Celesta Ciate go?”

“...Huh?”

Responding to Nina’s words, Kojou reflexively looked behind him. Celesta, who’d been sitting where Kojou and Yukina had been until just earlier, was nowhere to be found. She’d vanished at some point.

Seeing that there was no uproar within the restaurant, it did not seem that she’d been kidnapped, but—

“Um...Miss Celesta left the restaurant by herself a little earlier,” Kanon said, meekly opening her mouth as she pointed at the emergency exit at the back of the restaurant.

Kojou and Yukina gawked when they saw the still half-open emergency exit. Kojou and the others hadn’t noticed it, which was apparently why Kanon had been desperately trying to inform them for a while.

At any rate, Celesta had vanished. She’d left without a single word to Kojou and the others.

“That...idiot! What the hell is she thinking?!”

At the same time that Kojou voiced his frustration, Yukina broke in a run toward the emergency exit.

Visibly worried, Kanon and Astarte watched her go, a sense of responsibility evident on their faces.

4

Running down the emergency exit stairs, Kojou linked up with Yukina at the shopping mall entrance. As an added measure, he’d asked Kanon and the others for their help, specifically having them search the lingerie shop and the women’s restrooms. However, as of yet, no word had come that they had found Celesta.

“Himeragi, did you find her?”

Yukina, the guitar case still on her back, shook her head at Kojou. “I am sorry.

I should have cast a surveillance spell upon her as well in case of this.”

“‘Her as well’... Wait, don’t tell me you have that spell cast on *me*?!”

That brought a faintly anxious expression over Kojou as he looked all over his own body.

“Senpai, right now Celesta is more important than—”

“Yeah...you’re right...”

Kojou nodded vaguely. But immediately afterward, he abruptly stopped.

“Senpai?”

When Yukina looked over her shoulder with a questioning expression, Kojou gently shook his head.

“Ahh... Nah, I was just thinking, maybe we shouldn’t be trying that hard to find Celesta. Maybe she doesn’t want us to, and stuff.”

“Do you really think that?!”

Yukina’s eyes widened, seemingly taken aback. However, Kojou’s lips merely trembled a little in regret.

Celesta vanishing made even Kojou feel empty to a surprising degree. It could even be said that it depressed him. Certainly, he knew Celesta didn’t trust him, but he’d intended to clear that up somehow. That alone made the damage of the betrayal all the greater.

“Isn’t that true, though? Celesta wasn’t abducted by someone... She left of her own free will. She doesn’t have any reason to be with us in the first place. We don’t even know what that Vattler guy had in mind when he sent her to us.”

“Senpai—!”

Yukina shot Kojou a look of despair. The hurt expression she wore was as if Kojou had abandoned Yukina herself.

Kojou did not know the reason why she was so indignant, but now that he thought about it, Yukina had been partial to Celesta from the very beginning—particularly when Celesta had been called an icon. Kojou felt like Yukina had been patiently watching over Celesta, even when the latter called her plain.

When Kojou tried to open his mouth to ask Yukina about that, the phone in his pocket rang.

“Aw crap, who could it be at a time like this...?!”

Coarsely clicking his tongue, Kojou took out the vibrating cell phone. The number on the screen was one he knew well—Asagi’s.

“Kojou, I know what Zazalamagiu is!”

“Asagi, sorry, right now I’m in the middle of s— Wait, you do?”

Kojou, trying to interrupt Asagi’s words, hastily pressed the phone firmer to his ear. Though anxious about Celesta’s whereabouts, the true nature of Zazalamagiu wasn’t unrelated by any stretch.

“Right, Asagi—tell me. What the hell is that Zaza thingy?!”

“Zazalamagiu...is a god.”

“What? A god...?”

Kojou knitted his brow, visibly thrown off by the exorbitant term Asagi had uttered. However, Asagi continued in a dead serious tone:

“Yes. It’s a forgotten god, because the people who worshipped it died out. It also goes by the Deity of Darkness—a dark god, in other words. He’s the king of the underworld, slaughter, and destruction. There’s a record of him being worshipped in a little city in Central America some twelve hundred years ago.”

“I don’t really get it, but what—it’s a minor god no one even remembers?”

Kojou grasped the gist of the situation. Zazalamagiu truly being the name of a god would explain why Celesta had been called his icon. The city-states of Central America worshipped a wide variety of deities. This Zazalamagiu had probably once been a god among many.

“I suppose. The problem is, the data on this ‘minor’ deity is heavily protected in the Demon Sanctuary archives. Apparently, once in the past, this Zazalamagiu made an appearance.”

“Appearance? You mean someone summoned him?”

Kojou’s expression grew graver. Summoning a god and making him take

physical form was not a story he could easily believe, but he couldn't just dismiss it as nonsense, either.

From ancient to modern times, traditions of gods descending to answer people's prayers had been passed down all over the Kansai region. And moreover, Kojou had once battled an artificially created "angel." Even if incomplete, an angel had been made to take physical form, so who was he to say it was impossible to do the same with a god?

"Probably. No precise information remains, so I don't know the details, but at any rate, thanks to Zazalamagiu appearing, every urban area in a five-hundred-kilometer radius was wiped out, extending from the city of Ciate that worshipped him. It's said over two million people lost their lives in a single night —"

"The city of Ciate...?!"

Kojou gulped, feeling a cold chill run down his spine. The woman named Celesta Ciate was referred to as the icon of Zazalamagiu. He didn't think it was mere coincidence.

"That's right. On current-day maps, it'd be right around the border of the Chaos Zone. Of course, the Chaos Zone was only established after the city-state of Ciate was destroyed."

Asagi, unaware of Celesta's existence, explained in a leisurely tone of voice. However, Kojou only half heard the words.

"Got it. Thanks, Asagi. You're a lifesaver."

"Oooh... Wait a minute! Kojou, why do you know the name of a dark god...?"

Ignoring Asagi's attempts to inquire, Kojou met the eyes of Yukina, right beside him.

"Himeragi, you got all—"

"Yes, I heard."

Yukina, drawing her face near to Kojou's ear, nodded with a sober look.

"If Celesta truly is the icon of a dark god, the beast men after her could be descendants of Zazalamagiu worshippers. If so, their objective might be—"

“To bring Zazalamagiu back?”

Temple. Icon. Priestess— Only now did Kojou feel like he understood these isolated snippets of information.

The beast men had said they’d “raised” Celesta. They’d probably meant that she’d received special favor as the priestess of a dark god.

If that was true, he could understand why they’d pursued her. Celesta was no mere priestess. She was a precious ritual object for summoning the dark god—a “sacrifice” difficult to replace.

Kojou didn’t know why the beast men hoped for Zazalamagiu’s advent. However, if summoning Zazalamagiu was their goal, they would surely move to take Celesta back—whatever the cost.

Moreover, Celesta herself was not yet aware of this. She’d be in danger if they didn’t find her as soon as possible.

“I’ll save her,” Kojou murmured in a suppressed voice.

Yukina blinked, seemingly struck by surprise.

“Eh?”

“I’m just a brat, I don’t know anything about the Fourth Primogenitor’s power, Vattler’s an annoyance, and I’ve got no interest in a dark god.”

Kojou clenched his teeth.

The image of a little vampire girl, sleeping in a coffin of ice, emerged in the back of his mind.

It was joined by the self-proclaimed Great Alchemist of Yore, the watcher for a liquid-metal life-form, and a junior of his made into an artificial angel. *I won’t let there be any victims like them again. If I’ve gotta make an enemy of a god, so be it*, he thought.

“But what bothers me more than any of that are guys who think they can treat a brat who doesn’t know nothing like a tool—icon this, sacrifice that—and the idiot who just gives up and accepts it as fate! Lend me a hand, Himeragi! We’ll save that stupid Celesta! Count on it!”

“Yes, of course!”

Yukina’s eyes sparkled as she nodded with vigor. It was as if Kojou’s words had saved Yukina herself. But naturally thinking it an inappropriate thing to say given her position, she immediately hurried to restore her look of composure.

“Ah...n-no... By that, just now, I meant I would accompany you as your observer...”

Heedless of Yukina’s halting murmurs to herself, Kojou returned the phone to his ear.

“Asagi, look up one more thing. Where is the *Oceanus Grave II*?”

“*Why you...*” Asagi, completely ignored for the last little while, raised her voice in an apparent sulk. “*Well I don’t need to look up whose ship it is. Vattler’s, right? It’ll be coming into port any minute.*”

“Huh...?!”

“*You don’t need to be that surprised, sheesh. It went off somewhere for a little while, but it’s been on its way back, right? I think you should be able to see it with the naked eye by now—*”

“...”

Kojou silently shifted his gaze in the direction of the harbor. From his current location, he couldn’t see the harbor due to Keystone Gate being in the way. However, what about the view from the restaurant on the topmost floor of the building Kojou and company were at just a little earlier...?

It was surely a fair distance from there to the harbor, but still—

“Don’t tell me she saw Vattler’s ship...? What kind of eyesight does that girl have...?”

Murmuring this, Kojou hung up. He heard Asagi’s protesting voice for one last moment, but he didn’t have any time to care.

Kojou was the one who’d told Celesta about the *Oceanus Grave II*. It seemed plausible that, noticing Vattler’s return, Celesta was rushing to his side without a thought to the consequences. From her perspective, Vattler was an individual worth hurrying for—and in the first place, beyond Kojou and the others, he was

the only person on the island she could rely on.

Right around then, Kojou and Yukina saw Kanon and Astarte running toward them. Both were out of breath, probably from running around searching for Celesta.

“—Sorry, you two. We probably know where Celesta is. Kanase, Astarte, can you head home now? We’ll be in touch when things settle down.”

Having said this, Kojou brought his hands together toward the pair.

In reality, they didn’t actually know where Celesta was. Even narrowing it down to the harbor left a wide area to search, and to start with, they had no proof Celesta was really headed there. Nonetheless, he’d decided he could not expose Kanon and the others to further danger.

With Kojou in that pose, Kanon lifted Nina up and presented her to him.

“Um, I’d like you to let us help...just a little more. I believe the director might be helpful.”

“Nina...?”

Kojou stared at Nina’s little body with a half-doubting look. He didn’t think the liquid-metal doll not even thirty centimeters tall would be much help at that point. A look of incomprehension came over Nina, perhaps wondering why Kanon would say such a thing.

“It’s all right,” Kanon said, smiling. “Miss Celesta put on a ring made of Wiseman’s Blood, so I believe the director should be able to find out where she has gone.”

“...Ohh!” Nina exclaimed, snapping her fingers in admiration. “I see.”

Wait, you didn’t even realize it, Kojou wearily thought as he looked down at the self-proclaimed Great Alchemist of Yore.

5

Celesta Ciate was standing on a pier outside the harbor.

She was wearing leather sandals and a colorful, embroidered dress. Her

trademark honey-colored hair was flapping in the strong ocean breeze.

She leaned over a rusted railing as she gazed absentmindedly at a ship floating in the bay. It was an extraordinarily large, privately owned cruise ship, the *Oceanus Grave II*—if the words of Kojou Akatsuki proved true, Dimitrie Vattler would be aboard.

I want to meet Dimitrie Vattler, she had thought. He is the savior who rescued me from despair in that blood-drenched temple. But...I don't want to meet him, she also reflected. I feel like, if I meet him, everything will come to an end. All of this tranquility, like a brief, happy dream—

“Celesta—!”

Kojou called her name. With annoyance, Celesta looked over her shoulder in the direction of the voice. Kojou, out of breath from running, saw for himself that Celesta was all right, so he stopped, seemingly exhausted of strength. Yukina, standing still at his side, took a handkerchief out and began meticulously wiping his sweat-covered brow. *They're acting intimate even in a public place*, thought Celesta, twitching an eyebrow.

She'd figured they'd probably catch up eventually, but it had been much faster than she'd anticipated.

They've probably been looking for me pretty desperately. Grudgingly, she could not fail to acknowledge that this made her just a little bit happy, but she covered up that emotion with a glare at Kojou.

“What did you come for?! Are you a stalker?! You really are a pervert, aren't you?!” she accused.

“Oh, shut up! What do you think *you're* doing?! Running off on your own like that—what would you do if you couldn't meet Vattler, huh?!”

Kojou replaced Celesta's barbs with one of his own.

“Th-that doesn't have anything to do with you!”

“Like hell it doesn't, idiot.”

“I-idiot...?! Did you just call me an idiot...?! ”

“I'm here because I want to save you! Come with us already!”

“What the hell?! That doesn’t make sense!”

Celesta continued giving Kojou an annoyed glare, even while feeling overwhelmed by his unnerving bluster. However, he did not avert his eyes.

Finally, Celesta seemed to relent, her cheeks puffing up in a pout as she belatedly murmured, “I remembered.”

“Ah?”

“Memories from before Lord Vattler rescued me. Just a little, though.”

“Then that means...”

Kojou broke off what he was going to say halfway. He knew that Celesta’s last memory had been of someone trying to kill her in that temple.

“They...abducted me from my village and took me to a run-down temple deep in the forest. They meant to use me as a sacrifice.”

Celesta put her fragmented memories into words.

The silhouette of the *Oceanus Grave II* had triggered the return of her memories. She’d seen the ship once before, probably right before being transported to Itogami Island after the tragedy at the temple.

“By them, you mean the beast men? Zazalamagiu worshippers?” Kojou asked belligerently.

However, Celesta shook her head. “You’re wrong... Those were the people... trying to protect me...”

“...What?!”

“The people trying to sacrifice me were...soldiers. A woman...was giving them orders.”

Celesta closed her eyes as she remembered the scene.

A large number of beast men had gathered at the temple to rescue the kidnapped Celesta. Then they were killed—by soldiers bearing modern equipment and using bizarre tactics.

If Dimitrie Vattler had not appeared at that moment, the beast men would have certainly been annihilated, and then Celesta would have been killed, too:

offered as a sacrifice to a dark god—

“A woman...? Soldiers...?”

Celesta’s confession shocked Kojou. His reaction was so intense that it confused her.

“Wait, don’t tell me it was that Angelica Hermida chi—”

With a sober expression, Kojou pressed Celesta further, and the next moment...

“—Senpai!”

With a ram to his side, Yukina shoved Kojou—hard.

Kojou, having no clue what was going on, was bowled over on the spot. Then, with incredible force, something sailed just past him into the area he’d stood but a moment before.

Concrete fragments blew into the air, scattering as far as fifteen meters from where they’d been standing.

He’d taken gunfire—from a faraway sniper.

“Himeragi?! Was that—?”

Kojou got up, whipping his head around in astonishment.

“We are surrounded! But...when did they...?!”

Yukina drew her spear from the case on her back. However, before she could deploy her weapon, several figures appeared around Kojou and the others: a woman and two men. They were probably all foreigners.

Though they wore plain gray clothing, the pair of men oddly stood out. Both men had shaved heads and were nearly two meters tall. One had a beard, and the other wore a sunglasses-shaped device over both of his eyes.

For her part, the woman’s appearance stood out even more than the men’s. She had a tall, model-like figure and an artificial kind of beauty. Even though she wore an extravagant, fur-trimmed coat, Kojou could tell that it concealed a well-honed physique underneath.

The woman drew a compact submachine gun from under her coat.

Even to Yukina, possessing Spirit Sight that allowed her to glimpse an instant into the future, the submachine gun's high rate of fire was a grave menace. The woman, well aware of that, trained the barrel onto Yukina. The failure of the initial sniping attack had allowed her to accurately assess Yukina's capabilities.

"Don't move, any of you."

The woman spoke in fluent Japanese. The instant Kojou lowered his posture, seemingly about to come punching, she riddled the ground in front of his toes with several bullets.

It took a few moments for it to sink in that the woman had aimed and shot instantly. Her shooting was fearsomely quick and highly accurate.

"That was a warning. The next shots won't miss."

The woman calmly continued to speak in a businesslike tone, neither a bluff nor intimidation, simply stating a fact.

"You're...Angelica Hermida?" Kojou glared.

"Hmph." The woman narrowed her eyes in displeasure. "To think someone in the Far East Demon Sanctuary would know my name... It would seem you are no mere civilian."

"So you are," Kojou said, accepting the fact.

Angelica Hermida had probably been monitoring Kojou and the others for a good while. Perhaps they'd been looking for the right time to abduct Celesta. However, their plans had changed, and they'd come after the girl hastily. That was because Kojou had spoken Angelica Hermida's name.

Now that he knew her identity, the odds were high that he would take some sort of countermeasure against her. She had no doubt thought, if that were the case, better to execute the abduction of Celesta before such preparations were in place.

Though truthfully, Kojou was in no position to stop her, having no idea who or what Angelica Hermida was, but—

"Well, fine. We have but one demand. Hand over Celesta Ciate. I wish to avoid unnecessary combat. I would be grateful if you simply complied,"

Angelica stated.

Kojou bit his lip. They were facing three opponents, all armed with guns. Even with Yukina's combat capabilities, it was impossible to take them on and protect Celesta.

The Sword Shaman was an expert in anti-demon combat. The gear the Lion King Agency had provided her was intended solely for fighting demons. Fighting trained soldiers was outside her expertise.

If Kojou used his Beast Vassals, it was probably possible to overcome the predicament, but he didn't think Angelica Hermida would just stand by and watch until he finished summoning one; more likely, they'd turn him into Swiss cheese the instant he moved to summon one. They were between a rock and a hard place.

"What do you...plan to do with Celesta?"

Kojou, backed into a corner, spoke in a wrung-out, broken voice. However, all he received in return was Angelica's scornful gaze.

"We're the ones asking the questions."

"...What?!"

"I'll say it once more. Hand over Celesta Ciate."

Kojou silently shifted his gaze and looked at the expression on Celesta, who stood right beside him. What hovered in Celesta's eyes was pure fear toward Angelica and the others.

The instant Kojou saw that, his resolve hardened. No, he'd decided long before: The whole reason he'd chased after Celesta was to keep her from making a face like that.

"I don't wanna."

Kojou boldly smiled as he spoke. That was his answer at that moment, and probably, too, the answer Yukina hoped to hear—

"Is that so? A pity."

Without fanfare, Angelica Hermida waved her *left* hand—not the right one

holding the submachine gun, but the left, purportedly holding nothing.

In that instant, a giant, invisible blade swung down on Kojou and Yukina.

Yukina blocked the unseen slash with her silver spear. Angelica's blade, woven from magical energy, dissipated as soon as it came into contact with the magic-nullifying Snowdrift Wolf.

However, even Snowdrift Wolf could not erase the kinetic energy from Angelica's slash. The recoil from warding the blow sent Yukina flying several meters nearby before she somehow landed on her feet.

Kojou, however, had been unable to evade or block Angelica's attack.

“—Senpai?!”

Yukina's breath caught when she saw Kojou stagger.

Then, before her very eyes, fresh blood gushed from Kojou's neck.

A deep gash ran from his left shoulder down to his right flank.

It was as if a giant ax had chopped into him, with the wound running all the way to Kojou's back.

“Noooooooooooooooo—!”

A scream gushed out of Celesta's mouth.

Then, Kojou slowly fell to the ground.



CHAPTER FOUR THE INCUBATOR

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1

“Guh-oh...!”

Globs of blood poured out from Kojou’s throat. With his legs drained of strength, he fell to both knees.

The ferocious pain alone made his entire body’s nerves feel like they were set ablaze. His vision was completely dyed crimson.

“Kojou!!”

Caring nothing of sullyng her freshly bought clothes, Celesta crouched down at Kojou’s side. It was thanks to her that Kojou barely managed to remain lucid. Using what little sensation remained to him, Kojou pressed his right hand against the wound. *I’m all right*, he said, showing her a fierce smile.

“That attack...?!”

Yukina, mindful of Kojou’s wounds, was unable to make a move. Both her hands were going numb as they gripped the silver spear. Even Yukina’s Spirit Sight had been unable to detect the invisible slash. Furthermore, its force was in a completely different league than a mere thrown weapon such as a knife. It was a heavy attack, reminiscent of a guillotine blade falling upon the necks of the condemned.

“Ho... So you blocked my blade. Not bad at all for a civilian.”

Without giving Yukina any time to think, Angelica unleashed her slashing attack once again.

Naturally, even Yukina could not completely parry the unseen attack. Snowdrift Wolf’s barrier had its hands full blocking the demonic energy of the

blade. The undiluted impact of the blow sent her body flying once more. Though her movements softened the blow, the wear and tear was piling up all over her body.

Her managing to avoid taking lethal damage in spite of that was due to her experience facing a foe using a very similar technique. Angelica's invisible slash felt like it shared traits with the attack called Thunder Ax. However, this one was a step above in might, with enough destructive power that one hit could put even Kojou, the Fourth Primogenitor, out of commission.

"—Bouiller, Mathis. Secure Celesta Ciate. I'll play with this little girl a bit," Angelica Hermida ordered to the two men working under her.

Though the word *play* rubbed Yukina the wrong way, the cruelty in Angelica's eyes betrayed no joy from making light of Yukina. All she was radiating was pure, undiluted killing intent.

Her thought process was simple. Angelica saw Yukina, able to block her unseen slash, as an irregular variable impeding the completion of her mission. Therefore, Angelica would eliminate her then and there. Furthermore, she left no openings whatsoever. She was a different kind of opponent than any Yukina had faced before.

"Roger."

Angelica's men approached Celesta from both the left and the right. Their movements showed no carelessness. However, they were wary only of Yukina, still combat capable, and of Celesta running away.

Kojou had already sustained lethal damage. It was practically a miracle that he was still conscious. Even beast men with tenacious life forces or Old Guard vampires could not continue fighting in that condition. Their judgment was based on their abundant combat experience. That was the only thing left that Kojou could count on.

"Like hell you will—"

"...K-Kojou?!"

Before Celesta's shocked eyes, Kojou transformed the left side of his body into mist.

Kojou took his arm, now a mass of mist, and slammed it into the ground. That instant, the ground he'd touched also transformed into insubstantial mist. Having lost their footing, the men tried to instantly leap back.

But the indiscriminate mist Kojou had unleashed was far quicker.

“Take a bath in the ocean, fellas—! C’mon over, Natra Cinereus!”

A giant, hazy silver shadow emerged behind Kojou.

Natra Cinereus, fourth of the Beast Vassals serving the Fourth Primogenitor, governed the vampire ability to transform into mist. However, its ability applied not only to Kojou himself, but to all matter around him. Also, there was no guarantee that anything it turned into mist would ever return to its prior state. It was a destructive, troublesome Beast Vassal, well suited to the Fourth Primogenitor, destruction incarnate.

Once, when Kojou had been wounded, the Beast Vassal had run amok on its own to transform a part of Kojou’s body into mist. That was why Kojou had taunted Angelica and eaten her attack.

He’d let his own body be wounded, and his own Beast Vassal run wild. Backed into a corner, that was the only plan left to him. But...

“A vampire! *Tch*, Boland—!”

Angelica Hermida shouted into a transmitter implanted in her head. A moment later—

“—Gah?!”

On the verge of his counterattack, Kojou rolled to the ground, fresh blood gushing out.

A large hole had been gouged out of his torso, completely obliterating his heart.

The blow instantly made Kojou’s mind go blank for a moment, releasing his Beast Vassal from its summons. The mist-transformed ground became matter once more, though warped and twisted like hardened lava.

“The sniper?! Oh no—?!” Yukina exclaimed when she saw Kojou’s wound.

Angelica Hermida had one last subordinate. He'd taken aim at Kojou with a sniper rifle from the top of a lighthouse some distance away. And at Angelica's command, he'd accurately blown away Kojou's heart, and nothing else. His sniping skill was terrifying.

Kojou had only transformed the left half of his body into mist. His right half had remained solid to shield Celesta from being turned into mist herself. They'd taken advantage of that weakness.

"Gu...oh...!"

Having lost his heart, Kojou could no longer even stand. He desperately tried to remain sitting up, but lifting his head was all he could manage. With Kojou in that state, the bearded man went on the offensive. He stripped a glove off his right hand—a stark, metallic prosthetic.

"That was a hit, Boland! I'll handle the rest—"

The man turned the palm of his false hand toward Kojou's head. There was a gun barrel embedded in the center of the palm. At that range, there was no way to escape being shot. And if his head was completely crushed, even the healing ability of the Fourth Primogenitor would surely require considerable time to revive him. Even if Kojou returned to life, he could protect Celesta no more.

"—?!"

A roar rang out as a searing blast grazed Kojou's cheek.

However, it was not Kojou who was blown away, but rather, the man pointing the gun barrel at him.

"Irrlicht!"

Together with the cold reverberation of the young man's voice, a giant bird of prey emerged, surrounded by a ray of light. From the sky far above the harbor, the huge creature, its wingspan reaching several meters, blew away the man with the prosthetic hand that was below it.

Though the man escaped a direct hit by a hair's breadth, the ground at his feet was scorched at very high temperature, instantly melting.

The bird of prey was a vampire's Beast Vassal—a mass of flame reaching tens of thousands of degrees Celsius.

“That Beast Vassal's...?!”

Kojou and Celesta gazed in astonishment at the unfamiliar Beast Vassal appearing right before their eyes.

The man who appeared at their side had a handsome face reminiscent of a cold, sharpened blade.

“A disgraceful sight, Kojou Akatsuki—”

The young man looked down at the fallen, bloodstained Kojou, speaking with visible scorn. Kojou knew that face well.

“Tobias Jagan?! What are...you doing here...?!”

“Orders from His Excellency, Vattler. I have been monitoring these people from Zenforce. It seems the protection of Celesta Ciate really is too much for the likes of you.”

Jagan waved his right hand. The incandescent raptor transformed into a beam, racing a distance of several hundred meters to destroy the lighthouse at the end of the pier—the lighthouse where the sniper who'd shot Kojou was lurking.

“Zenforce...?”

“CSA special forces. They're too tough for you. If you understand that, stay there crawling on the ground like a worm and behave yourself! Anmauth!”

Leaving the sniper to the raptor, Jagan summoned a new Beast Vassal.

This was a steel-colored, humanoid ape reaching a total of four to five meters in height. It was a steel golem, taking physical form via dense demonic energy. It swung down both arms, resembling giant steel clumps, at the man with the prosthetic hand, carving the ground.

The man with the prosthetic glared at Jagan, controller of the Beast Vassal, smiling with obvious delight.

“A subordinate of Dimitrie Vattler? I'm grateful.”

“Grateful...you say?”

“Taking on a civilian brat was making me feel bad. But I can kill a Warlord’s Empire aristocrat with a clean conscience!”

“Cease your prattle, brute!”

Jagan’s expression twisted into anger, perhaps from sensing an air of contempt from the man’s words. As he did so, the man with the prosthetic vanished before him. He’d leaped with such incredible speed not even a vampire’s quick reflexes could keep up.

The attacker appeared behind Jagan and opened fire.

Jagan was too slow to evade it. However, a moment before the shells fired at him would have ripped his body apart, the golem standing beside them reached out with a steel arm, intercepting all the bullets.

“I see... You’ve fused magic objects with cybernetics. You’re the Sorcerous Troopers the CSA is so proud of.”

Even seeing the incredible physical capabilities of the man with the prosthetic brought no major change in Jagan’s expression; it grew a little sharper, but that was all.

“But your brain’s still human, isn’t it? Wadjet!”

Jagan’s crimson eyes unleashed a ghastly, demonic light. This was the glow of the invisible Beast Vassal he had dubbed Wadjet. It invaded the minds of those whose eyes he met, taking them over—

“Mathis—!”

Realizing the nature of Jagan’s attack, the man with a sunglasses device over both eyes called out the name of his comrade. However, the man with the prosthetic did not respond. Jagan’s Beast Vassal had already seized control of his will.

Jagan’s opponent did not move when the steel golem went to strike him.

It was an attack from which there was absolutely no escape. However, the man with the prosthetic hand just barely evaded the lethal attack. His movements were unnatural, like those of a marionette manipulated by unseen

strings.

“Tch...automated evasion, is it?!”

The mechanical body of the man with the false hand had evaded Jagan’s attack independently of the man’s own will. Jagan clicked his tongue as he realized this.

The man in sunglasses moved, taking advantage of the opening Jagan had left. The flesh over both his shoulders tore open, exposing the magical devices embedded within. The bizarre devices were like countless vertical metal plates arranged sideways.

“You were careless, Count Jagan—”

The man’s magical devices, resembling radiator fins, unleashed a vivid, rainbow-colored shimmer. The ground touched by that shimmer was charred instantly.

The magical devices produced an incandescent luster to eliminate their target, turning it to ash. Kojou didn’t understand how it worked, but there was no doubt it was a magical device built for the sole purpose of killing demons.

“Ugh...”

The unexpected force of the sunglasses man’s attack made Jagan twitch. He hadn’t thought that special forces soldiers, not even sorcerers in their own right, would employ offensive magic to that extent. Compatibility and magical energy of no small measure were required to activate powerful magical devices. Apparently, they’d cleared that limitation through paying the cost of mechanizing their own flesh and blood.

But by the time he understood that, it was too late. Taking advantage of Jagan’s momentary lowering of his guard, the shimmering attack’s large radius left him no room to flee. The rainbow-colored radiance enveloped Jagan—



Or so the sunglasses man thought, when a giant thunderbolt appeared without warning, transforming into the form of a dazzling lion. The lightning lion dispersed the rainbow-colored shimmer, saving Jagan.

“Regulus Aurum!”

On one knee, Kojou had summoned a new Beast Vassal.

His destroyed heart had already regenerated. Properly speaking, rather than an actual heart, it was more like an insubstantial pacemaker built out of a mass of demonic energy, but if it let him move his body, it was good enough for him.

His severed left shoulder had somehow finished reattaching. It wasn’t perfect, but he could fight—the product of the super-healing ability, akin to a curse, that vampire primogenitors possessed.

“Kojou Akatsuki, why you—!”

“I’m...returning the favor from earlier, Jagan...,” Kojou announced triumphantly.

Jagan trembled in humiliation, shooting a glare at Kojou.

“How absurd! I did not require your aid! You’re just in my way!”

“Not only are you all talk, but you’re a sore loser, too...”

Fresh blood trickled down Kojou’s lips as he replied in kind. The wounded state of the Fourth Primogenitor’s body made controlling a Beast Vassal a heavy burden, after all. Still, Kojou’s and Jagan’s Beast Vassals had disrupted the cohesion of Angelica’s unit.

“Senpai!”

The Beast Vassal’s high temperature caused Angelica to lose sight of Yukina, who seized the opportunity to rush to Kojou’s side.

“...You’re okay, Himeragi...?”

“Yes, I am. But at this rate, your endurance will—”

Yukina propped up the wounded Kojou. Without a word, Celesta lent Kojou her own shoulder.

Controlling the overly powerful Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor took an incredible toll on Kojou's endurance. If combat became prolonged, the heavily wounded Kojou would be at an overwhelming disadvantage. Worst case, his Beast Vassal might become uncontrollable and run wild, potentially placing Yukina and Celesta in danger.

"Mathis, can you move?"

With one man drawing off the Beast Vassals, Angelica was getting her unit back on its feet. The man with the prosthetic hand, robbed of his mind by Jagan's attack, had rebooted, regaining his sanity.

"I'm all right, Major. The proxy bought it, but it's not a problem."

"Very good. Team up with Bouiller and take down the vampires. Boland and I will handle the Beast Vassals."

"Roger—"

Accepting Angelica's instructions, the male duo began moving against Kojou and the others once more.

Fear crept into Kojou's face. Thanks to Jagan's timely aid, their forces were more equal, but protecting Celesta put heavy restrictions on how Kojou could move. And if they took an attack that threatened to envelop Celesta, Kojou had no option besides shielding her with his body. Understanding this, Angelica's subordinates shifted to a position from which they could aim at Kojou and the others in confidence.

Then, in confusion, they stopped moving, because Celesta had acted contrary to expectations.

"Wait—"

She walked forward, spreading her arms wide as if to shield Kojou and the others. The men could not launch their attacks out of fear of a direct hit on her.

"Stop this! I'm the one you're after, right?! Then—"

"Celesta! Come back!"

"Celesta, you mustn't!"

Kojou went after Celesta with his wounded body. Yukina simultaneously leaped after her.

“Do it.”

Seeing that both were defenseless and in their line of fire, Angelica gave her men the order to attack. The man with the prosthetic turned his gun toward them. Then—

“Nuoo?!”

It was the man with the false hand who groaned in agony from being riddled with automatic weapons fire. The unanticipated barrage came from atop the ocean. The large-caliber machine gun’s barrage traveled faster than the speed of sound. They finally heard the gunfire after a brief delay.

“What...?!”

Angelica Hermida looked over her shoulder.

The person manning the machine gun was a woman aboard a small motorboat. She was a young woman wearing yellow-colored “camouflage” that really, *really* stood out. The woman piloting the boat was wearing blue camo fatigues that were just as noticeable. Both had shockingly good looks.

“Enemy reinforcements? The so-called Island Guard? No...”

Angelica’s eyes narrowed when she noticed new figures coming onto the pier.

The two girls moving to encircle Angelica and her men were teens wearing white and black camouflage, respectively. She didn’t think they were proper guardsmen, but nor were they mere civilians. Their movements were clearly those of trained soldiers. They were probably equal to Angelica’s unit if judged by training level alone.

“Lord Fourth Primogenitor~~. Are you all riiiiight?”

The last to land was a girl in crimson clothes. She was carrying a giant weapon embellished with urban camouflage.

“Th...they’re...!”

Kojou murmured in abject shock when he realized just who the mysterious

girls were. They were the Maid Brigade from the *Oceanus Grave II*.

Though he was calling them maids in his mind, they weren't actually servants; rather, they were the daughters of royalty and key ministers born in nations bordering the Warlord's Empire. He'd heard that they were originally handed over to Dimitrie Vattler as "hostages" to ensure the safety of their home nations. However, Vattler's fetish was not hostages or women but combat, so he'd ended up treating the girls as simple guests.

As a result, with an abundance of free time, the girls had done as they'd pleased, attempting to seduce Kojou to move up in the world, and had become famous on video-sharing websites, even transferring to Saikai Academy, but—

"A guided missile launcher?!"

Angelica's lips trembled with dismay when she looked at the weapon the girl in red camouflage was carrying. Sorcerous Troopers could withstand attacks on the level of rifle bullets with ease, but even they could not shrug off hits from heavy machine guns and missiles. Fighting all that firepower in addition to fending off two noble-class vampires put them at a disadvantage.

"Tch."

Further combat would be fruitless. Judging this, Angelica Hermida instantly revised her tactical objective.

Namely, from annihilating the enemy to capturing her target.

Trusting in the speed of her machine-enhanced flesh, she would secure Celesta Ciate, who was standing still in a daze, and flee. It was probably possible to shake off enemy pursuit, using her two subordinates as sacrificial pawns if need be.

Having calculated all that in an instant, Angelica lowered her center of gravity, preparing to accelerate. A moment later—

"Oh, no, you don't. I won't let you take her, Angelica Hermida."

Suddenly, the ground around Celesta Ciate was set ablaze.

Angelica clenched her teeth when she realized the density of the demonic energy packed into those flames. An amber Beast Vassal of burning lava coiled

around Celesta, apparently to protect her. Naturally, even Angelica didn't think she could leap into molten magma and recover the girl alive.

"Dimitrie Vattler—," Angelica murmured when she caught sight of the man controlling the new Beast Vassal.

Enveloped by golden mist, a blond, blue-eyed vampire appeared at the end of the pier. Wearing a three-piece all-white suit, a handsome smile came over him as he gazed at Angelica.

"Retreat. Boland, cover us."

Angelica Hermida ordered her subordinates before leaping away herself. Landing on the rooftop of a warehouse outside the harbor, she vanished from Kojou's sight. The men under her had already finished pulling out, too. Seeing that the enemy had completely bugged out, Kojou released his Beast Vassal from its summons.

Relief came with the simultaneous return of pain over his entire body, and Kojou collapsed on the spot once more.

"Aww... Is it over already?"

The girl in the red camouflage suit lowered the missile launcher, having lost her opportunity to let it loose.

2

One of Vattler's subordinates must have set up a person-repelling barrier. In spite of combat that extravagant, there was no sign of the Island Guard rushing to the pier. Or perhaps Angelica Hermida's people had interrupted communications or taken some other measure beforehand.

When it came to destroying evidence, the Oceanus Girls were apparently no slouches. The girl wearing blue camo was hacking the crime prevention cameras with a notepad PC she'd fished out. Kojou, still propped up by Yukina, watched the scene, feeling like he'd seen such a thing somewhere before.

"Heya, Kojou. It seems you protected Celesta just as I had hoped. As expected of my beloved."

Vattler addressed Kojou with his annoying, theatrical manner of speech.

“That’s really creepy, so don’t say that even as a joke,” Kojou vented indifferently without even looking at him.

Vattler studied Kojou’s reaction, chuckling in even greater apparent delight.

“You also did well, Tobias. What of Bloodstained Angelica?”

“...All was as you anticipated. They are indeed tenacious—however, on a squad level, not opponents requiring your personal attention. The fool of a Fourth Primogenitor ended up like this, though.”

Jagan stood ramrod straight as he replied. The edges of his words oozed with enmity toward Kojou. He was no doubt dissatisfied that Vattler had entrusted the protection of Celesta not to him, but to Kojou.

“The problem is how the CSA intel branch will move. They must be using a civilian corporation as a front for operations on Itogami Island—”

“I see. If Angelica Hermida requests support from them, it might get interesting,” Vattler said, smiling as if he was licking his lips in anticipation.

Kojou exhaled painfully. It seemed nothing good would come of leaving the man to his own devices.

“Wait, Vattler.”

“...Mm? What is it?”

A charming smile came over Vattler as he glanced over his shoulder.

Kojou felt Celesta’s breath catch behind him. But to Kojou, who knew what Vattler was like on the inside, that smiling face was just fishy.

“Would you mind explaining what’s going on here? All of it.”

“Of course. However, let’s change locations first. Setting aside treatment, you will require a change of clothes, won’t you?”

Vattler pointed in the direction of the docks as he spoke. His very own *Oceanus Grave II* was docking at the harbor right around that time. Certainly, Kojou couldn’t exactly go out on a stroll wearing bloodstained clothing. The invitation to Vattler’s cruise ship seemed his only option. Besides, with Angelica

Hermida after her, Celesta would find the interior of the ship to be the safest location on Itogami Island.

However, she remained hidden behind Yukina's back, seemingly unable to meet Vattler's eyes for some reason. If anything, she appeared to be avoiding him.

"—Hey, Celesta. What's wrong?"

Kojou found her behavior odd. Celesta made a start and shivered a little. She awkwardly turned her head, moving like a gear that had run out of oil.

"Wh-what?"

"Whaddaya mean, what? You've finally been reunited with Vattler, your idol, right? Be happy and stuff."

"I—I am happy. Vattler looks as handsome as always... Ahh... So cool..."

"So say hi to him or something."

Kojou slumped his shoulders in exasperation. Even his left shoulder, sliced off by Angelica Hermida, had recovered to where it could move that amount.

"A girl has to be emotionally prepared! And my hair is a mess, and these clothes are so cheap—"

"Er... I'm the one who paid for those clothes, you know..."

Celesta's self-deprecating line was like another wound to Kojou.

"More importantly, are you really all right...? You were hurt so badly...," she said.

"I'm not all right whatsoever. It hurts everywhere, and my clothes are a mess."

Kojou tugged on his ripped, shredded parka to demonstrate. There was a huge slice into the collar, and big holes had been burned open in the front and back. It was a miracle that his clothes were holding together at all. He'd rather liked that parka, but he had no choice but to buy a new one.

"S...sorry."

With Kojou down in the dumps, Celesta quietly spoke to him from behind.

The admirable words were so unlike her that Kojou doubted his own ears for a moment.

“Eh?”

“I said I’m sorry! And thank you! For protecting me... That...made me happy...”

Celesta bashfully intertwined the fingers of both her hands as she spoke sulkily in quick succession.

Her downturned expression made Kojou’s eyes open wide as he stared at her. Even after Celesta walked off, the sheer shock of it left Kojou unable to move for a while.

Yukina gazed at Kojou’s face with half-lidded exasperation.

“You seem quite taken by her, senpai... How indecent.”

“I’m not taken, and it ain’t indecent!” Kojou hurriedly insisted, his cheeks unintentionally flushing.

It was a five-minute walk to the pier where the *Oceanus Grave II* was moored.

No matter how often Kojou saw it, the enormous ship was majestic. Last he knew, part of one deck had been destroyed, but at some point, repairs had been finished, and it looked more dazzling than ever.

It was that stunning viewing deck to which Vattler led Kojou and the others. With the sun behind them at an angle, the vast sky and the water’s horizon spread before them.

And there, dressed in gold-embroidered clothing, an eccentric group awaited them.

They numbered nine in all. All were male, but their ages were all over the place, ranging from white-haired old men to young men barely in their twenties. They must have been VIPs, because they all wore various jewelry and gemstones in addition to the gold embroidery.

The vivid brown color of their skin somehow came off as similar to Celesta.

“What’s with these guys?” Kojou murmured unwittingly.

Yukina, right beside him, replied in a low whisper, “Demons. Probably beast

men, I think.”

“Beast men...?! Wait, you don’t mean...”

“Yes. Please be careful, senpai.”

Kojou was shocked as Yukina issued caution. It wasn’t just Angelica Hermida after Celesta. High-end beast men capable of divine bestialization had gone after her first.

With Celesta shuddering, freezing up from fear, Kojou and Yukina stood to each side in a defensive posture. However, as if to mock the pair for their vigilance, Vattler smiled warmly and stated:

“There is no need for concern, Kojou. They are no enemies of yours.”

“...Not enemies...?”

Hearing those words did not immediately put Kojou at ease, especially with Vattler providing the guarantee. But:

“They are descendants of the beast-man priests that governed the ancient Central American city-state of Ciate, one of the world’s oldest beast-man tribes. Incidentally, in their homeland, beast men were revered as servants of the gods.”

“Priests of Ciate, you say...?! Then the god that they worship...would be—”

An ill feeling crept over Kojou. The city-state of Ciate—he remembered that name, part of the information that Asagi had dug up. And the god worshipped by the people of that city was—

“The Deity of Darkness—Zazalamagiu.” Vattler laughed, unable to repress his surge of joy.

Vattler, a battle maniac, could scarcely hope for a better foe than an ancient, dark god that once killed over two million people. He’d spare no effort if it meant fighting such a powerful opponent.

Don’t tell me he’s seriously trying to resurrect a dark god, thought Kojou, fear running up his spine.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me... Zazalamagiu’s a dark god of destruction and

disaster, ain't he?! How the hell are worshippers of his on our side?!"

"As I would expect of you, Kojou. So you knew of Zazalamagiu. However, it seems you have a small misunderstanding."

"Misunderstanding?"

"Certainly, they are priests that serve Zazalamagiu, but that does not mean they want the dark god to appear—quite the opposite. It is their duty to keep Zazalamagiu sealed, you see. In a city deep in a tropical rain forest, they have continued the ceremonies that have kept the raging god bound for over a millennium, an unsung task unknown to all." Vattler turned to the priests and asked, "Isn't that right?"

They nodded in a dignified manner. Apparently, Vattler wasn't pulling the wool over Kojou's eyes.

"Zazalamagiu's true nature is a mass of energy without material form. Just like Itogami Island right here, Ciate existed atop a dragon line nexus. However, due to the nature of the geography, the energy did not flow out, but rather, built up over time. I'm sure you can imagine what would happen if such energy exploded?" Vattler explained in a jovial tone.

Kojou silently nodded.

The energy that flowed from dragon lines was said to bring prosperity to a city. The place Itogami Island had been constructed, floating on the Pacific Ocean far from the mainland, was at such a crossroads between dragon lines atop the ocean.

However, if that power surged to excess, it would invite disaster. At the top of a list was an ancient civilization, a kingdom said to have been destroyed by such dragon line power running amok, sinking into the Atlantic Ocean in a single night.

"I see... So that was the big disaster way back..."

"Yes. But there is one more reason Zazalamagiu is referred to as a dark god. The people of Ciate built a sorcerous device for materializing dragon line energy in their very own temple."

“Materialize... Wait, what the hell for?!”

“To control the power of the dragon lines. It’s just like our vampire Beast Vassals. Condensed magical energy achieves sentience and takes physical form. And if you can make it take material form, you can control it.”

“Then...what the hell’s with Celesta?” Kojou asked.

If the dark god was really an accumulation of energy from the earth, what did Celesta, a mere human being, have to do with it?

“She is the bride of Zazalamagiu, an individual beloved by the dark god. She embraces the egg of the Deity of Darkness, absorbing dragon line energy, waiting eagerly until it is time to hatch.”

Yukina, standing close to Kojou and continuing to protect Celesta, interrupted with a look of surprise. “Absorbing...dragon line energy...?! Then Your Excellency sent Celesta to Itogami Island because...?!”

“Yes, because this is the place with the strongest dragon line flows in this world. Zazalamagiu’s egg will crumble if it is split off from dragon lines for too long, after all. That would not leave the bride unscathed. Therefore, I had to put her in suspended animation and have her brought to this island.”

Vattler’s mood did not seem particularly dampened as he replied to Yukina.

Kojou remembered the sight of Celesta stuffed into a suitcase. She hadn’t been merely sleeping back then; she’d been put into suspended animation and then revived when she’d arrived at Itogami Island, itself atop dragon lines.

“...Why did you go through all that trouble to get Celesta out of the country?”

Kojou shot Vattler a reproachful look. Vattler’s reply was pure and simple.

“Because there were people after her.”

“What?”

“You’ve seen them yourself, Kojou. The CSA is after Zazalamagiu. Their special forces attacked the Temple of Ciate, slaying a large number of priests in the process. I had to bring the bride out of the country to ensure her safety.”

“Special forces— You mean that Angelica woman and her people...?”

They were Sorcerous Troopers, with special combat devices embedded into their mechanized flesh. With their combat capabilities, they could probably roll over a beast-man tribe. Celesta's testimony, that a female soldier had killed the beast men, backed that up.

"What do they want to wake up a dark god for?!"

"The CSA is involved in the civil war within the Chaos Zone. They provide money and arms to the rebel army and stir up the populace. Angelica Hermida is an expert at special operations of that kind."

"The...Chaos Zone..."

What does that have to do with Celesta? Kojou thought in confusion. A single girl, and the giant issue of a war—the scale of the two were so far apart that Kojou couldn't connect them.

Vattler gazed at the perplexed Kojou, shaking his head with visible delight.

"But no matter how much backing the CSA gives them, the civil war in the Chaos Zone won't last for long. After all, the Chaos Bride resides in that nation. At the moment, she's an amused spectator, but she'll move immediately if the blood of her citizens is actually shed. That will be the end of the rebel army. Well, it would be a different story if they had a weapon that could take on a vampire primogenitor... Yes, such as..."

Vattler chuckled aloud with a smile rich in implication.

"...Zazalamagiu?! They want to use a dark god as a tool of war...?!" Kojou shouted, scowling.

The disconnected gears in his mind suddenly came together. He ought to have realized it the moment he learned of Angelica Hermida's identity.

It was only a few days ago that Yukina had wondered if the CSA had gotten its hands on a trump card for opposing the Third Primogenitor. There was probably no being more suitable for taking on a vampire primogenitor than a dark god that had once slaughtered millions.

"An ancient dark god versus the Third Primogenitor—that matchup is rather interesting and eye-catching, but unfortunately, this is not something we can

ignore.”

“Damn right!”

Kojou’s fist shook with surging anger that had no outlet. He, too, knew the combat capabilities of Giada Kukulkin, the Third Primogenitor, very well. She was a monster controlling twenty-seven Beast Vassals with destructive power on par with natural disasters. He couldn’t even conceive of the casualties in the surrounding areas if she and Zazalamagiu went toe to toe.

Vattler watched Kojou’s vivid anger and broke into a satisfied smile.

“It seems your thoughts and mine are aligned, Kojou. A fight with a dark god is such a wonderful event. It would be boring to let others handle it.”

“That’s not what I meant! I meant stop the dark god from getting summoned!” Kojou yelled at Vattler, who’d reacted exactly as he had feared.

To vampires bored with long, nigh-eternal life, risking their lives in battle against a powerful opponent was the only supreme pleasure remaining to them. And even among the vampires Kojou knew, Vattler’s urge to do battle was extraordinarily strong—hence, why he was called a battle maniac.

“Hmm. If that is what you think, then it cannot be helped.”

However, Vattler readily accepted Kojou’s assertion, defying the latter’s expectations. Even so, the smile that came over Vattler’s lips was both handsome and cruel.

“But are you really fine with that? Halting the advent of Zazalamagiu means, in other words, killing Celesta Ciate.”

“What...?”

“Celesta Ciate is the icon of Zazalamagiu. So long as she draws breath, the egg of Zazalamagiu *will* hatch someday. Destructive dragon line energy will accumulate until it reaches that point years, perhaps decades, into the future.”

Kojou was conflicted as Vattler’s blue eyes stared straight at him.

“—But she can be killed as she is now. The effect on the world should be no more than that of a large volcanic eruption. The accumulated divine essence will return to the dragon lines, and the Deity of Darkness will resume its long

sleep once more. That is how the priests of Zazalamagiu have kept the god sealed.”

Vattler looked at the line of beast-men priests with visible delight. They listened to the exchange between Vattler and Kojou in silence. Toward Celesta, their eyes reflected reverence, awe—and the clear desire to kill.

Yukina propped up the girl’s back, and Kojou shifted, hiding the two behind his back.

“So they want to kill Celesta...and they wanted to from the start...”

“I suppose so,” Vattler replied in a lighthearted tone. “But you would be wrong to reproach them. They had no other way of controlling the dark god. Besides, being a sacrifice does not necessitate an unhappy life. Every bride in history has died satisfied. Even if that was false happiness created by ritual magic—”

“So that’s why Celesta has no memory...!” Kojou snarled, shielding the quivering girl.

It wasn’t just fear of the attack that had made Celesta’s memories of her past so vague. Celesta’s memories had been stripped from her using ritual magic—by the very same priests who’d protected her.

“I eliminated the CSA forces in the Chaos Zone during the time I had you take care of Celesta Ciate. If the dark god does not appear, the civil war in the Chaos Zone will soon come to an end without the Chaos Bride having to lift a finger. That is why...,” Vattler continued, his amused smile like that of the serpent that tempted the denizens of Eden, “...the rest is up to you, Kojou. Kill Celesta Ciate—and stop the resurrection of the dark god? Or await the advent of the dark god here on Itogami Island? Choose whichever you wish.”

Kojou bit his lip in silence. Celesta’s shoulders shuddered. Her chilly fingertips frailly grasped his sleeve.

“Wait, Vattler...lemme ask one thing. If Zazalamagiu materializes, what happens to the bride...to Celesta?”

Kojou put his faint hopes into the question.

Vattler had called the thing inside Celesta the egg of Zazalamagiu. *Egg* was probably just an allegory; more likely, it was a magically created proto dark god. The egg, existing in another dimension—higher-planar space—was beyond Kojou’s reach.

However, if the dark god materialized, the so-called egg would cease to be connected to Celesta. If that was the case, and they defeated Zazalamagiu when he descended, they ought to be able to free Celesta—

Vattler smashed Kojou’s fleeting hopes with ease.

“No matter how excellent a spiritualist, she is not a vessel sufficient to accept a god. The bride will be annihilated, unable to endure the impact of Zazalamagiu’s emergence— Well, it is natural to think that. In the first place, I do not think Celesta Ciate’s mind will hold together that long.”

“...Lord...Vattler...”

Vattler’s indifferent reaction elicited a faint trickle of a sound from Celesta. To her, amid loneliness and worry, Vattler’s existence was her final place of refuge. However, Vattler didn’t want Celesta at all; he only wanted the dark god inside her. That fact backed Celesta’s psyche into a corner, opening cracks in the process.

“So that means Celesta dies either way...?”

Kojou desperately sank into contemplation. *There has to be another way*, he stubbornly believed. *Don’t let him fool you*, he told himself. There had to be an answer somewhere. An ideal solution—one where the dark god did no damage, yet Celesta lived.

Yukina kept Celesta, trembling with despair, on her feet. Her own fingertips trembled as she clenched her spear.

This was the purging spear, Snowdrift Wolf—able to nullify magical energy and rend any barrier. However, not even her spear could save Celesta. Evil or not, Zazalamagiu was a god, and Snowdrift Wolf, wrought from artificial divine essence, could not negate a real god’s power.

Even so, Kojou desperately continued to speculate.

Something's fishy about this, his subconscious pleaded. He understood Angelica Hermida's objective as well as the true nature of the beast-men priests. Kojou couldn't think of any motive for Vattler to deceive him on those fronts.

But something tugged at the back of his mind. If the objective of the beast-men priests was to kill Celesta, then who were the beast men that raided Yukina's apartment...?

Why would they try to capture Celesta alive instead of killing her right there?

If their objective was to keep the dragon lines of their own city from running amok, sending Celesta to a foreign country fulfilled their mission then and there. If anything, it was far better for them if Celesta was to die on foreign soil. They hadn't killed her—but why?

Maybe returning the favor to Vattler for saving them? Or—

That was when a low, guttural voice echoed from atop the ship.

"No...you are wrong, vampires of foreign lands. It is not so."

The youngest man among the priests transformed into a beast as he laughed.

An absurd amount of foreign energy spewed from his flesh: divine bestialization. No one seemed to understand his reason for doing so.

"You never had that choice to begin with—"

Vattler was the first he attacked.

With his claw, shrouded by incredible demonic energy, the divine beast gouged the Master of Serpent's flesh from the back; unable to even look back at the ambush, his upper body broke to pieces. Demonic energy flames burned everything, leaving not even a single scattered cell from his lungs, his heart, or his skull.

"...Vattler?!" Kojou shouted as he witnessed the end of the young aristocrat.

Then Kojou was assaulted, struck by a blow to his side. Another priest had used divine bestialization, mowing Kojou's body down. The Fourth Primogenitor, his left side deeply gouged, tumbled onto the ship's deck.

“Senpai?!”

Yukina’s expression contorted in grief. It was all so sudden, even she had been unable to move.

Then—

“N...n...o...oo...ooooooooooooooooooooo...!”

Celesta let out a wail.

3

The color of the sky abruptly changed.

The serene, blue afternoon sky shifted to an ominous reddish-purple, like the crack of dawn. The clouds swirled in a tornado-like vortex, and lightning flashed a countless number of times. A fierce wind suddenly began to blow, rocking the hull of the *Oceanus Grave II*.

“Lord...Vattler..... Kojou...”

Celesta Ciate murmured with a hollow, overwhelmed expression.

Vattler, who had kept her spirit aloft, had been slain; Kojou had sustained grievous wounds and was on the brink of death. The spectacle decisively shattered Celesta’s already fragile psyche. Kojou, recipient of the curse of immortality, would not die from wounds that shallow, but such reasoning did not mitigate the terror of seeing Kojou’s scattered pieces of flesh.

The wind raging all around Celesta sent Yukina, who had been guarding her, flying.

“A...aaah...”

Floating above Celesta’s head was a strange sphere that seemed like a hole carved out of thin air. Disgusting speckles appeared on its surface, and it continued to eerily wriggle around like the internal organ of a living creature.

The sphere was not even a meter in diameter. However, it felt like it was growing, feeding on the air itself in the process.

The strongest impression given off by the sphere, which seemed to be projected from Celesta, was that of an egg. The egg from which some grotesque, otherworldly creature would be born—

“Heh...heh-heh...heh-heh-heh-heh...”

The divinely bestialized man laughed as he beheld the remains of Vattler that lay at his feet. The expression that came over him was not exultation in victory but unease. It changed into the frail smile of a small man desperately trying to justify his impulsive act of slaughter.

“How frail, vampire. So even the Master of Serpents of the Warlord’s Empire falls to the claw of a divine beast...”

The divinely bestialized man seemed to speak more for his own benefit than anyone else’s as he stomped on Vattler’s remains.

“Why you—!” Jagan yelled, enraged as he started toward the divine beast. He glared at him as he materialized an incandescent bird of prey. But—

“Wait...Jagan, don’t!”

Kojou, fresh blood still spurting from his wounds, rose to his feet and just barely stopped Jagan, for the other divine beast had moved in front of Celesta.

In that moment, even with the bizarre sphere summoned, Celesta was defenseless. If she sustained a serious attack from the divine beast, her life would be snuffed out like a candle.

“Don’t move, vampire scum. If the bride dies like this, who knows what the dark god possessing her might do. You can’t touch us without blowing the whole island away.”

The second divine beast spoke with a tone that sounded lively somehow. His belly had a deep burn scar carved into it—left by Nina’s particle cannon. They were indeed the divine beasts that had attacked Yukina’s apartment.

“Why...have you...?” a priest asked, voice shaking.

It was the reaction of someone who could not understand the sudden betrayal by his comrades.

“Don’t take it personally. We’ve lived our entire lives tied to the middle of a

rainforest pampering little girls possessed by a dark god. *She* offered us treatment suitable for superior beings like us. All we have to do is hand over one little girl.”

“You fools...,” the eldest priest murmured in apparent pity for the traitors.

Having come this far, Kojou finally understood the whole story. Why did Angelica Hermida know the precise location of Zazalamagiu’s temple? Why had she found Celesta so easily on Itogami Island, a place she had never visited?

That was because she had turncoats among the beast-men priests; they knew Celesta’s scent. That explained the attack on Yukina’s apartment, as well as their pursuit of Celesta as far as the docks—a simple feat for a beast man’s sense of smell.

They’d sold their pride as priests, lured by the sparkle of gold. Small wonder Kojou had sensed something off about the beast-men priests’ conduct. Their acts had been inconsistent from the start because they had traitors among them—

“You old bags of bones, what are you...?!”

It was the first traitor whose voice trickled out in shock; before the eyes of those taking Celesta hostage, the priests carved out their own hearts.

Kojou and Jagan were bewildered as they, too, stared. It had happened in an instant, with no time to stop them.

“So all goes as Dimitrie Vattler intended, does it...? Regretfully, the duty of our tribe has come to an end. We have failed to prevent the emergence of the Deity of Darkness—”

The priests hurled their very own hearts into the sphere above Celesta’s head.

“Don’t tell me you’re performing the ritual to summon the Divine King—!” a divinely bestialized man exclaimed in fear.

One second later, absorbing the priests’ blood, the egg shuddered with an audible *thump* like a heartbeat.

“With the despair of the bride and our priestly blood...the summoning ceremony is already complete.”

The eldest priest smiled with visible satisfaction.

His flesh dissipated, spewing fresh blood all the way.

The egg ate him, Kojou realized.

From the wriggling, speckled surface of the sphere, whiplike tentacles had reached out, snatching the priest up in an instant.

Nor was the eldest priest the only to be consumed. One by one, tentacles snatched the other priests, pulling them into the sphere. Then...

“S...stop...stoooooooooop!”

“S-save me...uaaaaaaaaaa!”

...the tentacles enveloped the divine beasts’ bodies, too.

The green tentacles were actually vines: ivy-like plant tendrils. These writhed around the huge divine beasts like snakes, pulling them into the sphere, which increased in size as it consumed the priests. Already, the sphere was over seven meters in diameter, growing large enough to cover the deck of the *Oceanus Grave II*. It seemed to be the seed of a monster, yet also a gate to another world.

Celesta, no longer conscious of her actions, slowly spread both arms to her sides. Then countless vines entwined her entire body.

“Wa...it...Celesta...!”

Kojou instantly reached out toward Celesta when he realized what she was trying to do. She intended to go inside the sphere.

However, before he could touch her, countless whiplike vines struck him. He groaned aloud in agony as the vines wrapped around his limbs and tried to tear them off.

It was Yukina’s clear voice that stopped Kojou’s receding mind at the precipice.

“Snowdrift Wolf—!”

The silver spear lashed out, cutting asunder the vines, which were magical energy in material form.

Kojou slammed onto his back, coughing violently.

“Are you all right, senpai?!”

Yukina twirled her spear around as she landed by Kojou’s side. “Probably,” Kojou said weakly as he forced himself to sit up. The wounds all over his body were slow to heal. That figured for a wound from a divine beast, but the damage from Angelica’s attacks earlier also hindered him. He’d lost too much blood.

Celesta had vanished, already brought into the sphere. At that moment, Kojou and the others had no means to save her. They did not know how to stop the dark god from becoming incarnate.

What’ll we do? wondered Kojou, gritting his teeth at his own powerlessness, when suddenly, Yukina touched the tip of her spear to her own wrist. Droplets of fresh blood poured from the shallow cut in her pale flesh.

“Himeragi...?!”

“I apologize, senpai. Right now, this is all I can—”

Kojou was dumbfounded as Yukina sucked blood from her wound and pressed her lips upon his, blood included. The taste of her blood flowed into Kojou’s mouth, spreading within him.

“Senpai, I am leaving the rest to you!”

“Himeragi?! What do you think you’re—?!”

When Kojou tried to stand, Yukina delivered a violent kick to his abdomen, sending him flying. Kojou, cast out of the viewing deck, proceeded to fall down the stairs.

“Hime...ragi..... Celesta...”

The last thing Kojou saw was Yukina’s back as she sliced apart the incoming vines and leaped into the sphere.

The disturbance in the heavens grew fiercer still.

Violent winds swirled in the reddened sky. The tall waves that came crashing made all of Itogami Island shudder.

Amid it all, the egg floating in thin air began to pulsate violently.

4

“So this is the revival of the Deity of Darkness that destroyed the city-state of Ciate, huh...? Quite a sight.”

Motoki Yaze murmured with a strained smile as he gazed at the sphere floating in the red sky. He was a young man with short, spiky hair, wearing headphones around his neck.

He was sitting on the roof of Itogami Island’s central airport terminal, the place Natsuki Minamiya had encountered Angelica Hermida not two days earlier.

The huge pier where Kojou and the others were fighting was two thousand meters away. However, even from that distance, the bizarre hole carved into thin air had grown large enough to make out with the naked eye.

Standing beside Yaze, Natsuki Minamiya kept her parasol over her head as she remarked, “You’re very relaxed about this, Yaze. That entity must be a wild card for you lot.”

Yaze looked up at his diminutive, doll-like homeroom teacher and carelessly shrugged his shoulders. “Pretty much. That’s why some of them figure the information’s really valuable.”

“Hmph. Troublesome for you.”

“That’s the position I’m in. Can’t be helped.”

Yaze scratched his head as if poking fun at his own expense.

The flip side of his position as Kojou Akatsuki’s friend was that Yaze was assigned the troublesome task of monitoring the Fourth Primogenitor. In that role, Yaze had been completely blindsided by the Celesta Ciate incident.

High-ranking beast men with the ability of divine bestialization; Dimitrie Vattler, noble of the Warlord’s Empire; Bloodstained Angelica with her Zenforce—they were monsters, each and every one beyond reach of the combat

capacity in the Gigafloat Management Corporation's possession.

Hence, Yaze could do nothing about the situation once he realized Celesta Ciate's true nature. He'd be lying if he claimed he could watch Kojou suffer like that, offering no aid, and not hate himself in the process.

But it was true nonetheless that the incident provided a precious opportunity for a "rehearsal."

"—So what's the Corporation AI's analysis of that round thing?" the homeroom teacher asked.

"Ahh, a kind of defense field created for letting that Zazalamagiu thingy descend to Earth. Kind of like an egg. They figure there's some kind of 'core' for the dark god inside of that thing. So they're prepping a laser attack satellite." Yaze checked the time on his wristwatch. "About ninety minutes to go."

The space-to-ground laser cannon built into an orbital satellite was one of the Gigafloat Management Corporation's aces up its sleeve, but the system was not yet complete. Its power generation capacity and the height of its orbit meant it took three hours to set up a single, precise shot toward Itogami Island. It was anyone's guess as to whether it'd make it before Zazalamagiu took physical form.

Whether the laser bombardment could destroy the egg was another matter altogether.

"And the means to stop the dark god from materializing—?"

"Unclear at this point. We checked info in the other Demon Sanctuaries, but there's nothing but old records anyway. Guess we've gotta count on Himeragi."

"The Schneewaltzer of the Lion King Agency—that's reckless, like trying to hold back spillage from a dam with a single stick," Natsuki said, furrowing her brow.

Even Yukina's magic-nullifying spear was at a disadvantage versus a foe brimming with divine essence. If Zazalamagiu fully materialized, there was surely nothing she could do.

"I'm sure she's buying time trusting that Kojou can manage somehow. As a

matter of fact, she's given us extra time to deal with the thing. That girl's got guts..."

"You seem to really like that about her."

"Well, I won't deny it. She reminds me of my childhood friend and all." Yaze smiled a bit.

Natsuki snorted, unmoved. "To what degree will Itogami Island be affected if it materializes completely?"

"If it's just the egg, it's no big deal."

Climate change is a bit of a bigger deal, Yaze thought, words he kept to himself.

"If it continues growing at its current pace, we calculate it'll be over ninety-six hours before it affects gigafloat functions. As long as we've got ritual spell camouflage, most of the citizens won't even notice it's there."

"—And if the dark god descends?" Natsuki asked without a single twitch of her eyelids.

"Haven't calculated that."

Yaze's reply was blunt.

For the first time, Natsuki's expression shifted as she asked, "Is that to say, the scale is too large for even the Corporation's AI to predict?"

"Nah. It means there's no point calculating it. At this rate, Zazalamagiu will burn up all his spiritual energy before he completely materializes, destroying himself."

"Really now," Natsuki murmured in visible admiration. "So the transfer student's reckless efforts are not in vain."

"Yeah. Well, in the first place, the thing's cut off from its own temple and was summoned without proper fuel or a proper ritual. It'd be pretty weird if it could draw on its proper strength, all things considered."

"I see. But I don't like it. Damn that Vattler... Did he predict this result from the beginning? If so, why did he...?"

Natsuki was murmuring to herself. Suddenly, the look in her eyes grew graver.

Yaze immediately noticed the shift, too.

From inside the sphere floating in midair, green tentacles spewed out, wrapping around Island Guard vehicles surrounding the pier. The tentacles easily hoisted the armored vehicles, each weighing fourteen tons, and proceeded to pull them into the sphere.

“It *ate* the Island Guard?!”

Yaze fell to one knee, visibly irate. Natsuki’s lips twisted in annoyance.

“I see... So that’s your move. Damn that dark god.”

“Natsuki...what was that?!”

“That sphere intends to fuse with Itogami Island.”

“Fuse...?”

Natsuki’s words threw Yaze for a loop. Zazalamagiu was nothing more than a collection of energy spawned from dragon lines that had been given form by a giant sorcerous device constructed in the Temple of Ciate. Fusing with Itogami Island shouldn’t have been in the dark god’s tool kit, but—

“It intends to use all of Itogami Island’s residents as fuel to make up for the magical energy it lacks,” Natsuki explained. “Certainly, if it does that, it might endure the materialization process. Not as the proper Deity of Darkness, but as a simple monster—what would emerge would truly be a dark god.”

“Fuel... You can’t mean...”

“It probably means...all of Itogami Island will be consumed,” she calmly declared.

Yaze stopped breathing for a moment. Natsuki Minamiya was not the sort of person to crack a joke at such a serious time. If she said all of Itogami Island would be consumed, then consumed it would be.

“...They’re reacting quickly. So even the Corporation has begun to sweat?”

A horde of unmanned helicopters was taking off from the corner of an airport runway—Island Guard attack helicopters. Of course, Zazalamagiu was their

target. However, it was far from clear whether the Island Guard's anti-demon gear could defeat a dark god.

"Natsuki...?" Yaze looked up at his homeroom teacher.

Natsuki, who hadn't stirred an inch in all that time, abruptly began to walk forward, swaying her parasol.

She was staring at the sphere as it began encroaching upon the harbor district. There was a tall woman standing on top of a wrecked Island Guard armored vehicle—a woman with a fur-trimmed coat, with large-statured men flanking her.

"I have no interest in exterminating fantastical monsters. I have my own job to do—"

Leaving those words behind, Natsuki vanished. All that remained was a ripple in the place where she had stood.

Yaze slowly rose to his feet and put a hand into his pants pocket. The smartphone he took out was not a type he was familiar with.

"Well, then...this has become a bit of a mess. Mogwai...how's Asagi doin'?"

The liquid crystal display was still locked when Yaze spoke to it. The phone app was not running. However, he immediately heard a reply, spoken by a strangely human-sounding artificial voice.

"Very upset, I'm sorry to say. Fit to be tied. Well, she's locked in C without a clue why, so no surprise there."

The badly sewn mascot character laughed as it appeared on-screen.

"Sheesh... Maybe I'd better buy the Empress some cake to improve her mood," Yaze sullenly murmured to himself before cutting off the conversation.

He looked from the date displayed on the screen to the sphere floating in thin air in the distance, clicking his tongue in annoyance.

"I'm counting on you, Kojou. It's too soon..."

Yet, there was no way for Yaze's faint murmur to reach him.

The wind sweeping around him blew stronger—

CHAPTER FIVE
EMBRACE OF
THE QUEEN

CHAPTER FIVE

EMBRACE OF THE QUEEN

1

She remembered very little about her parents.

It's not that they didn't love me, she reasoned. Her fragmented memories, almost like film clips, contained faint traces of warmth, like the feeling you had from an afternoon nap.

But those happy times did not continue for long.

Her powerful, uncontrollable spiritual powers made her parents afraid. So scared that they avoided her, spurned her, verbally abused her, and alienated her.

By the time she had registered what had happened, she was already alone.

In the end, she was taken in by a large, tight-knit, influential group of spell casters. The faction worshipped a foreign goddess who took the form of a sacred beast—a wolf.

To the group, seeking a sacrifice to offer to the sacred beast as a means of enhancing their sorcery, they surely thought her strong spiritual power to be manna from heaven. They immediately began preparations for the ceremony to bring about the advent of their goddess.

However, their earnest hopes went unfulfilled, because the government, discovering portents of large-scale sorcerous terrorism, moved to disband the group.

And so, a single expert in anti-demon combat was dispatched—

A girl calling herself a Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency.

“This is—?!”

The place Yukina landed was the entrance of a vast ruin surrounded by forests on all sides.

Rows of countless stone pillars lined the inlaid stone path running between them.

A half-destroyed stonework temple stood at the center of the ruin.

Over a millennium had probably passed since its construction. The exterior of the temple was quite weathered, and moss and vines covered the stone pillars. The sun rays that poured down were even fiercer than those of Itogami Island.

“A temple? Don’t tell me this is the city-state of Ciate...”

Yukina murmured in bewilderment. She’d intended to use the otherworldly gate Celesta had summoned to enter the egg of Zazalamagiu. However, it was at that ruin Yukina had arrived. She couldn’t see Celesta, absorbed by the egg, anywhere.

“No, this is an imitation reproduced by sorcery...but...”

Yukina touched a stone pillar with her silver spear. For that instant alone, the stone pillar shimmered like a mirage, then vanished. That even Snowdrift Wolf could not completely nullify it was due to the unabated flow of demonic energy from which the stone pillar was formed.

The color of the sky was like flames, resembling daybreak—just like the color outside the egg. This indicated that the place was under Zazalamagiu’s divine influence. She could see no landscape beyond the ruin—and neither birds nor beasts.

The ruin was probably an enclosed world created by the dark god; it was a barrier.

Why did Zazalamagiu create this giant barrier rather than take material form directly...? When she considered the nature of the dark god, the answer was as clear as day.

Zazalamagiu was nothing more than an artificial god, a sorcerous device created to control dragon line energy. The sorcerous device called the Temple

of Ciate was indispensable for his complete materialization.

However, Zazalamagiu had been summoned to Itogami Island, far removed from the temple. Therefore, he had to re-create the temple itself. The dark god would himself build the sorcerous device required to summon him.

“Then, I should still be in time...!”

The ruin did not yet appear complete. Even with the dark god’s power, it had not been possible to reproduce matter on that scale from scratch. If that was the case, the dark god was probably trying to fuse with Itogami Island to make up for the missing mass, but that would take a fair bit of time.

She still had a chance to save Celesta.

“Celesta—”

Inside Zazalamagiu’s egg, Yukina probably wouldn’t be able to hold herself together for long. Snowdrift Wolf was still protecting her, but she didn’t know how long that would last as the dark god’s materialization progressed. She had to rescue Celesta while she still had a chance.

The vines covering the ruin began to wriggle, as if to frustrate Yukina’s resolve. The dark god’s consciousness had sensed a contaminant—this Sword Shaman—within the barrier and had set about expelling her.

“—Haaaaaaa!”

Yukina mowed down the vines assailing her and ran toward the temple at the center of the ruin.

2

He’d apparently lost consciousness, if only for a brief time.

“U...gh...”

Kojou shakily roused his body, covered in clothes soaked through by his own blood.

He was on a middle deck of the *Oceanus Grave II*. Kojou, on the verge of being absorbed by Zazalamagiu’s egg, had been kicked down by Yukina, thus allowing

him to escape.

The bizarre sphere Celesta had summoned was not in the sky above the ship; it had moved right above the harbor. Its diameter was ten times the size as when it had first appeared.

The many vine-like tentacles stretching from it greedily feasted on Itogami Island; it continued growing that very moment. A few of the vines were even entwined around the railing of the *Oceanus Grave II*. Kojou subconsciously reached out to rip them away when—

“Don’t touch them!”

The sharp, scolding voice halted Kojou’s movements. In surprise, Kojou shifted his gaze in the direction of the speaker.

“...What?!”

“Do not touch the tendrils. They, too, are part of Zazalamagiu. Touch them carelessly and they will drain your demonic energy. That will do quite some damage in your current state.”

The annoyed voice belonged to a handsome vampire—words cold like a knife.

Tobias Jagan was using his flame-enveloped bird of prey to burn away the vines constantly spewed out by the sphere. The heavy toll from controlling the Beast Vassal attested to the ferocity of his battle with the dark god.

“Jagan...you’re...?! ”

“Do not misunderstand. I am simply defending His Excellency Vattler’s ship. I do not need thanks from a fool like you. It is an annoyance.”

Jagan spoke bluntly. *Well, if that’s how he’s gonna say it, that’s how I’m gonna take it*, thought Kojou. After all, it was a fact the *Oceanus Grave II* was safe thanks to his valiant combat.

“So what’s that? What happened...?! ” Kojou asked as he glared at the sphere that continued to grow.

“A barrier to bring about the advent of this Zazalamagiu. He’s probably re-creating the sorcerous device needed to take material form inside other-dimensional space.”

Unexpectedly, Jagan gave an honest reply.

“Building it in other-dimensional space... You can do that?”

“I suppose it means even a dark god is still a god.” Jagan laughed sarcastically.

Kojou thought back to Natsuki Minamiya’s Prison Barrier—an other-dimensional prison built inside of Natsuki’s dreams. He’d thought of that as the product of incredible sorcery, but this sphere’s size was in a different league. If it kept growing, it’d probably swallow all of Itogami Island soon.

Furthermore, the fearsome sphere was nothing more than the sorcerous device to call the dark god down. But put another way, it also meant that the dark god had yet to descend.

“So we might still be able to get Celesta out of there—”

“Hmph. It seems that others have the same thought as you.”

The displeasure in Jagan’s voice was the tip-off. At the end of his sharp gaze stood four people, three men and one woman, atop a wrecked Island Guard armored vehicle: the CSA special forces.

“Angelica Hermida—!”

Angelica and the others used their bizarre magical gear to blow away the vines obstructing their path as they headed into the dark god’s barrier. Kojou had no doubt they had their sights set on Celesta. That being the case, the odds of Yukina encountering them again was high. *I’ve gotta stop them before that happens*, thought Kojou.

However, when Kojou attempted to stand up, he coughed up globs of blood and collapsed on the spot. His injuries were too great.

His immortal primogenitor’s body was continuing to repair itself. But he was still a far cry from being able to fight. Kojou was able to somehow remain lucid because Yukina had given him her own blood at the end.

Jagan stared down at Kojou, who could not even stand upright, with cold scorn as he quietly walked forward.

“...Jagan?! What do you think you’re doing?!”

“I will crush them. I don’t care what happens to your island, but I will not let the CSA dogs that bared their fangs at the Duke of Ardeal escape my sight.”

Leaving those words behind, Jagan leaped toward the interior of the bizarre sphere in pursuit of Angelica Hermida. All Kojou could do was helplessly wriggle and watch him go.

In such a state, Kojou heard a theatrical, annoying voice in his ear.

“—My, my, Tobias really isn’t honest about his feelings.”

The sound of that familiar voice sent Kojou whipping his head around in shock.

The young, blond, blue-eyed aristocrat was standing on the deck of the *Oceanus Grave II*, which was rocking in the violent wind. His flesh, purportedly completely destroyed, was without a scratch, and his stark-white, three-piece suit did not have a single drop of blood staining it.

“Vattler?! How...are you...?”

Kojou looked up at the unscathed Vattler, murmuring in a daze.

Vattler had sustained the divine beast’s attack, which had completely burned his flesh away. The injury was far graver than what Kojou had received. Even a noble-class vampire’s regenerative ability did not make returning to life an easy feat.

“Well done, Kira. That’s enough.”

Vattler quietly raised a hand, seemingly to answer Kojou’s doubts.

“Yes, Your Excellency—”

He heard a new voice, this time from the floor of the deck.

Pieces of Vattler’s flesh were still scattered all over the deck. Suddenly, those pieces of his body grew thicker, changing into black, shadowy blots. Those blots merged together to form a single large shadow, finally changing into contours identical to Vattler’s.

The shadow suddenly rose to its feet, progressively gaining thickness and color, finally creating a clone of Vattler that was his spitting image.

“Your Deionika Nox truly has its conveniences.” The real Vattler smiled in a show of admiration.

“Not at all. Forgive my rudeness.”

Dummy Vattler bowed to the original. Its face emitted a faint glow. The light seemed to fall away bit by bit, like an insect’s scales, and a handsome, androgynous vampire appeared from inside the dummy. This was Kira Lebedev Voltisvala—like Jagan, a noble of the Warlord’s Empire. He was Vattler’s other close confidant.

“What do you think you’re doing, Vattler...?”

Kojou scowled at Vattler, his gaze tinged with indignation at how Vattler had used his subordinate to feign his own death. However, Vattler demonstrated no hint of guilt as he shook his head.

“Ahh, sorry to have worried you. It was a bit of theater using Kira’s Beast Vassal to manipulate shadows and mirror images. A literal shadow warrior, if you will.”

“Why you... You knew from the start the priests had a traitor, didn’t you?! Don’t tell me you pretended to get killed to back Celesta into a corner?!”

“If I did, what do you intend to do about it?” Vattler chuckled and narrowed his eyes in amusement.

“What?!”

“I thought I told you at the beginning. You can kill Celesta Ciate and stop the resurrection of Zazalamagiu, or you can wait for the dark god to descend right here—those are your two choices. The situation has not changed. The time limit has merely come into sharper relief.”

“You—!”

Before Vattler’s words had even finished, Kojou moved, kicking off from the deck. Kojou slammed a fist full force into Vattler’s relaxed, smiling cheek.

Vattler did not bother to evade. A dull sound of bone colliding with bone rang out.

“That hurt, Kojou. Not that I mind it, coming from you...” Even as Vattler

touched his stricken cheek, his wry smile did not falter. “You may rest easy. We have predicted that materializing on Itogami Island will not permit Zazalamagiu to invoke his proper godly might. At present, he can be destroyed with ease. If you do not feel like doing it, I would be happy to do it in your place—”

“...Stop it.”

In the face of Vattler’s buoyant tone, Kojou’s teeth remained clenched as he spoke.

“Mm?”

“I said keep your grubby hands off! I’m not letting you do whatever the hell you want until I come back with Celesta and Himeragi!”

“Ha-ha... I expected you would say as much, but what will you do now?” Vattler spoke with the tone of one humoring an unreasonable younger brother.

Kojou grabbed him by the chest, lifting him upward with his blood-drenched right hand.

“Don’t forget, you handed Celesta to *me*. So shut up and watch till I’m done.”

“Hmm, I see... So that’s how you want to play.”

For once, Vattler deferred to Kojou’s point of view. He was a man of integrity in some odd cases.

“Very well. After all, as far as I’m concerned, a more complete dark god would be greater amusement. I might as well wait until Zazalamagiu finishes materializing. You have no complaints, then? Because, by that time, neither Celesta Ciate nor Yukina Himeragi will exist in this world.”

“Fine by me...!”

Kojou defiantly accepted Vattler’s terms. He didn’t like it, but Vattler was right. If he didn’t stop the advent of the dark god, Celesta, Yukina, and a whole lot of other residents of Itogami Island would lose their lives. If it came down to that, he’d be too late anyway.

“Ah, that’s right. If you really want to save those two, you’d best hurry. That temple is stealing matter from this island’s residents and the man-made island itself. The more time passes, the greater the damage will spread.”

Vattler seemed to enjoy telling Kojou that, savoring the boy's nervousness.

Kojou silently left the man behind, practically dragging his own wounded body forward.

3

"Ugh..."

Having disembarked from Vattler's ship, Kojou headed toward the ever-expanding sphere.

It was a giant rift carved out of thin air. The other world created by the power of the dark god was swallowing up the physical world, growing at a continually increasing rate.

Yukina and Celesta had to be inside that sphere. But before linking up with them, Kojou still had something he had to do.

He needed to stop the dark god's egg from fusing with Itogami Island.

Apparently, Zazalamagiu needed to completely re-create a sorcerous device required for his advent inside that barrier. The sphere was trying to fuse with Itogami Island to obtain the magical energy and physical matter required to build that device.

If so, it ought to have been possible to delay the dark god's arrival by cutting the sphere off from Itogami Island. That would both diminish the damage to the island and buy him time to rescue Celesta.

"—C'mon over, Sadalmelik Albus!"

Kojou poured his remaining endurance into summoning a Beast Vassal.

The sea parted, and a water maid appeared, its flesh seemingly composed of flowing water. Her upper body was that of a beautiful woman, and her lower half that of a giant serpent. Her flowing hair, too, was composed of countless snakes.

The water spirit's giant serpentine body became a raging torrent and attacked the sphere. Its slender hands, tipped with razor-sharp talons, tore at the

countless vines eating away at the artificial isle. He wasn't attacking the egg directly because the lives of Yukina and the others within it came first.

The Fourth Primogenitor's eleventh Beast Vassal was an Undine representative of a vampire's super-healing abilities. Whatever she touched was restored, almost as if time was being flung in reverse. Complex machinery came apart at an atomic level, and living things were returned to a state before they were ever born.

The water maid utterly destroyed the vines eating away at Itogami Island, returning them to the artificial materials that were their proper form. If he kept that up, he ought to be able to save not only Itogami Island but also chip away at the dark god's magical energy. But—

The water maid stopped moving, almost like something was suddenly pulling her from behind.

“What?!”

Kojou suddenly dropped to his knees, agony coursing like blood through his entire body.

New vine-like tentacles spat out by the sphere had stopped the water maid's movement. These coiled around Kojou's Beast Vassal like snakes, holding it in place. The water spirit's talons sliced the tentacles away, but even more tentacles had appeared to replace them. Instead, it was the Beast Vassal's attack power that was dropping—

“Ugh...! Al-Meissa Mercury—!”

Kojou summoned a new Beast Vassal: a two-headed dragon with quicksilver-colored scales. Its two heads stretched out, consuming the tentacles and freeing the water spirit.

However, that was as far as Kojou's counterattack could go.

“Why that...! It ate my demonic energy, didn't it...?!”

Kojou breathed raggedly over and over, barely keeping himself on his hands and knees.

His barely remaining physical strength was being chipped away little by little.

Kojou released his Beast Vassals from their summons, judging that he could not control them any further.

The dark god's egg was not eating into Itogami Island alone. It stole a vast amount of demonic energy as soon as its vines wrapped around Kojou's Beast Vassal. Now Kojou understood what had run Jagan so ragged. When protecting the *Oceanus Grave II*, the egg stole a fair bit of demonic energy from his Beast Vassal all the while.

Carelessly smashing his Beast Vassals against the egg was dangerous. Even the Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor were at a disadvantage in prolonged combat with such a foe. He had to cut the sphere off from Itogami Island and eliminate it with a single attack. Nothing less would work.

That was possible for Kojou—but not in his current state. His endurance had been depleted far too much for that. To the Fourth Primogenitor, his overpowered Beast Vassals were a double-edged sword. One false move and Itogami Island would itself be wiped off the map.

What should I do? Kojou pondered. His bewilderment left him wide open.

“Damn—!”

Sinuous tentacles whipped at Kojou, simultaneously attacking from above, right, and left. He couldn't dodge them no matter what he did, and Kojou lacked the endurance with which to dodge them to begin with.

“!”

“Defense mode. Execute, Rhododactylos.”

With Kojou frozen in place, what saved him was a giant arm that seemed to envelop his entire body. The humanoid Beast Vassal summoned by the homunculus girl deflected the attacks from the sphere.

“Astarte?!”

Rattled, Kojou called out the girl's name. The ability of Astarte's Beast Vassal, Rhododactylos, reflected all magical energy. Even the green tentacles that had eaten into Kojou's Beast Vassals had not penetrated her defense.

“Akatsuki! Thank goodness... Are you all right?”

With Astarte protecting her, Kanon came rushing over.

“Kanase?! What are you two doing here—?!”

“I am very sorry. We were worried about Miss Celesta and could not help but come to look,” Kanon said, conflicted over breaking her promise.

Seeing that Kojou could not stand on his own power, Kanon offered her shoulder without hesitation. Kojou’s blood sullyng her clothes didn’t make her flinch for even an instant. She earnestly propped Kojou up with her own frail body, dragging him toward safety.

“No... Thanks. You saved me.”

When she heard Kojou’s frail statement, Kanon silently shook her head and averted her eyes, blushing.

The sphere’s attacks continued, but Astarte’s Beast Vassal fended them off with little trouble.

Kanon had chosen the interior of the *Oceanus Grave II* as her place of refuge. The sphere was practically touching the tips of their noses, but they were out of its all-consuming path. It was probably a lot safer than blindly fleeing into a building.

Kojou couldn’t see any of Vattler’s people inside; maybe he’d instructed them to take cover. There was no sign of the man himself. Kojou was a little relieved that he wouldn’t be seen in such a disgraceful state.

“Where are Yukina and Miss Celesta?” Kanon asked, laying Kojou in a corridor within the ship.

“They’re inside that thing. I’m gonna go and get them back—,” Kojou declared, shooting a glare at the sphere, visible through a window.

Kanon’s blue eyes blinked with visible surprise. Nervously, she held Kojou’s body down.

“Akatsuki, that isn’t possible in your current state.”

Kojou, seeing Kanon shake her head at him, bit his lip.

His blown-away heart had finished regenerating, but that was only in terms of

functionality. There were still raw scars in the middle of his chest. His torn-off left arm had only just become able to move. He couldn't even count the other wounds over the length of his body. At that moment, Kojou didn't even have the strength to push Kanon off him. Of course she was worried.

"It's all right. Wounds like this'll heal up in no time—"

In spite of that, Kojou dragged himself to his feet. However, he barely took one step forward before dizziness struck, bowling him over. He had only a tenuous grip on his seemingly distant mind. It burned him, but Kojou had no choice but to accept it: He was in no condition to fight.

Astarte, having released her Beast Vassal from its summons, looked down at the fallen Kojou and stated, "I have a suggestion."

Kojou glanced back at her with a dubious expression. Astarte had a high degree of medical knowledge, but her knowledge of magic was not very deep at all. That she had something to say surprised Kojou a little.

"What? Sorry, but running isn't an option."

"Understood. Strategic retreat rejected. My second suggestion, then."

Astarte readily accepted Kojou's bitterly conveyed words. Then, she opened the door to a nearby cabin, grabbed Kojou by the scruff of his neck, and flung him inside. Next, she dragged Kanon along on her way in.

"Oww...! Astarte? What do you think you're...?! " Kojou exclaimed.

He looked around the interior of the cabin. It was a so-called linen room, with unused sheets and pillow covers piled up. There was a faint whiff of detergent in the air, but otherwise nothing special.

Kojou was beside himself, not knowing what Astarte had in mind. Then, to Kanon, looking just as lost as he was, the homunculus girl emotionlessly stated, "Kanon Kanase, please remove your clothing."

"...Eh?"

"Strip."

With Kanon rooted to the spot, Astarte slipped behind her and reached toward the top of her outfit.

That day, Kanon was wearing a frilly, modest-looking dress that had probably caught Natsuki's eye. It was a slightly old-fashioned design that perfectly fit Kanon's saintly ambience.

Out of the blue, Astarte undid all the fasteners on the dress's back. In addition, she grabbed Kanon's skirt by the hem and yanked it down without warning.

There was no longer anything to obstruct Kojou's view of Kanon's understated curves.

"Eh... Ah, um...?!"

Kanon, not understanding what was going on, stood rooted to the spot in her underwear.

Kojou gazed at her in bewilderment, unable to look away.

The sight of Kanon in her underwear affected him especially because it was so taboo. Her skin was so fair, far from the Japanese norm, and she was almost surreally slender. Her underwear was lavender in color, a matching set with a little bit of lace embroidery, making Kanon that much more adorable for it.

The very lightness of her skin tone made her blue veins stand out slightly from her modest breasts, mysteriously adding to her raw allure.

"W-wait! Hey, Astarte! What are you trying to make Kanase do?!"

Kojou, stricken senseless for a while, shouted as he regained his senses. On cue, Kanon covered her breasts as if remembering she was supposed to be embarrassed. The very natural gesture only underlined further to Kojou the fact she was a normal girl.

"My answer is—blood donation," Astarte replied expressionlessly.

Hearing this, Kanon clasped her hands together as if it somehow made sense to her.

"A-ahh... I understand now."

Seeing Kojou frozen in place, Kanon nodded strongly to herself. Then, with some goal in mind, she reached behind her back and abruptly unhooked her bra.

With her bra in danger of falling, she pressed it in place with both hands, crouching down in front of the prone Kojou.

Kanon's graceful, beautiful face peered down at Kojou, unbelievably close.

However, Kanon stopped moving, seemingly at a loss. She didn't seem to understand where things were supposed to go from there.

"Um...ah...it shouldn't be just... A-Astarte, please strip, too."

A frail expression came over Kanon as she sought the homunculus girl's aid.

"Accepted."

Astarte emotionlessly nodded and began stripping off her maid outfit. The sight of her exposed body, even tinier than Kanon's, drew a ferocious cough from Kojou.

"Wait a... Wh-why are...you two...?!"

In the first place, Astarte's homunculus body fluids would not aid in Kojou's recovery. Astarte herself surely was aware of that. However, whether she sparked sexual arousal was a different matter altogether.



The trigger for vampiric urges was not hunger, but lust. Having two half-naked girls around him in a cramped room was an extreme situation stirring deep emotions in Kojou that appealed to his instincts, making them difficult for reason to resist.

“Capture.”

As Kojou backed away, Astarte circled around him, sealing off his avenue of retreat. Her bare breasts pressed against Kojou’s back, rendering him unable to move.

“Wait a... A-Astarte...?!”

“I—I am not very good at this, but...”

It was Kanon who touched Kojou from the front. The faint light shining in from the window illuminated the girl’s silver hair. Its faint aroma and the warmth of her skin stimulated Kojou’s senses.

“Wait, Kanon. You’re wrong... You’re being tricked into this! Er, well, not that it isn’t blood donation, but...!”

“No, I am all right. This is simply what you are always doing with Yukina, isn’t it?”

Barely holding his rational mind together, Kojou admonished her as strongly as he could, but Kanon softly shook her head.

“It’s not *always*! There were all kinds of circumstances, so we had no choice but to—”

“But in doing so, you and Yukina saved me.”

“Eh...?!”

Kanon’s blue eyes watched Kojou from very close, conveying her unshakable determination. Both of Kanon’s arms gently embraced Kojou—like the affectionate embrace of a saint.

“That is why, this time, it’s my turn.”

“Kanase...”

Kojou quietly drew in his breath, enveloped by Kanon’s embrace.

His throat felt very dry. His bared fangs ached.

Kojou had once fought Kanon, who'd transformed into an artificial angel. That was why he understood her kindness more than anyone. He felt guilty for feeling vampiric urges toward such a compassionate girl.

But if Kanon, knowing that full well, forgave him for it, then...

And if it was to save people precious to him...

"It is all right. The words I spoke to Miss Celesta...were no lies."

Kanon exposed her slender neck to Kojou as she whispered into his ear.

Kojou's fangs bit into her pale neck.

A little sigh escaped Kanon's lips, apparently enduring the pain.

Kanon's arms, embracing Kojou, gripped him stronger. Her breath gently touched Kojou's ear.

"I have always loved Yukina. And I have always loved...you..."

4

The ruin was far vaster than she had anticipated.

Furthermore, the closer she approached the temple, the more the dark god's influence increased.

It was not only the vines covering the ruin but also the gravity, the very air, and everything making up that world that conspired to block their intruder-turned-enemy from her destination. The dimension itself was created to give birth to a dark god, and thus, such defensive mechanisms were to be expected.

But in spite of this, Yukina continued onward.

"—I, Maiden of the Lion, Sword Shaman of the High God, beseech thee!"

The silver spear Yukina poised emitted the dazzling glow of the Divine Oscillation Effect. That glow became a powerful defensive barrier that impeded the attacks the ruin sent Yukina's way.

From Yukina's perspective, it was a stroke of good luck that the divine aura of

Zazalamagiu, wrought from dragon line energies, was a very close cousin to Snowdrift Wolf's Divine Oscillation Effect. Though she could not nullify her opponent's power, in exchange, the enemy couldn't get a good read on her. She was able to move around inside the ruin much like a virus that had adapted to its environment.

"O divine wolf of the snowdrift, let the echoes of thy thousand howls become a shield and repel this calamity!"

Yukina's spear lashed out, smashing to pieces the shut door of the temple's entrance.

Protected by her barrier, Yukina stepped into the temple interior.

It was a bizarre room with no sense of up or down.

Where she stood—a floor in her mind—was a wall, and what she'd thought the ceiling was an angled floor. A place she'd thought was a set of stairs was actually nothing more than the back side of a different set of stairs, passing through a hole gouged into the floor and spreading out at the bottom into a beautiful blue sky. Outside the window on the ceiling was a landscape of the bottom of the sea.

It was a dimension of madness. Merely looking at it was enough to rob one's sanity.

A golden altar stood at the center of that dimension.

At the altar, she caught sight of a woman with honey-colored hair. Judging from the inverted sight, she was floating on top of the altar.

"Cele...sta?"

Yukina ran toward the altar. But that instant, all sense of up and down was ripped from her, and she tumbled onto the floor.

Gravity was misbehaving; however, this was not a defense mechanism of the ruin. This was a place for a god—a space in which none save the bride of Zazalamagiu was permitted entry.

"Please! Celesta, answer me...!"

Cognizant of that fact, Yukina stepped toward the altar nonetheless.

Perhaps Yukina's voice had reached her, because Celesta slowly opened her eyes. Seeing that, Yukina knew Celesta was still alive. Mentally, she was still a human being.

Above the altar, Celesta slowly turned over and replied, "Plain...Girl..."

The voice echoed of resignation and despair. Considering the situation she had been placed in, it was a very natural emotion.

"What...do you think you're doing? Run away, quick... Look at me, I'm already...," Celesta said.

Yukina's reply was swift. Propping herself up with her silver spear, she lifted her face, looked straight at Celesta, and smiled.

"No, I cannot flee. I am bringing you back with me."

Yukina's unflinching reply wrought an audible sob from Celesta's throat.

"What happens to me has nothing to do with you people, does it?! Go and be lovey-dovey with just you and Kojou at his place or something!"

"I will do that regardless!"

Yukina shouted vigorously in reply. For a moment, the power of it overwhelmed Celesta.

"...N-nice comeback...for a plain girl...!"

"However, I cannot go do that until I have brought you out of here with me!" Yukina declared, climbing another step.

I don't understand, Celesta seemed to say with a shake of her head. Yukina and Celesta weren't old friends or anything of the sort. If anything, her existence had to be an annoyance to Yukina and her companion.

And yet, why was Yukina exposing herself to such danger to save her?

"...Wh...y...?"

Celesta unwittingly murmured the word. If she wanted to stop the advent of the dark god, Yukina ought to have killed Celesta then and there. There would be no need to force herself to reach the altar after that.

However, Yukina shook her head with a shy, frail smile on her face.

“Because I’ll never forgive myself if I don’t.”

“Eh...?”

“I was the same as you. I was to be killed as a sacrifice to call down a god. It was before I had turned seven... Not that...Akatsuki-senpai or any of the others know about it...”

Yukina touched a hand to her chest as she spoke. It was as if she felt guilty continuing to shoulder such an abominable secret alone.

“But just before I was to be killed, there was someone who took me with her.”

Her foot was caught in a gravity distortion, and Yukina tumbled again. The stairs were not all that tall, but the inability to soften the blows meant she had to take their full impact. Pain coursed through the core of her body.

Yukina suddenly remembered what the Sword Shaman she’d met in her youth had looked like. At the time, she’d seemed very adult, but now that she thought about it, that girl couldn’t have been much older than Yukina was in the present. Yet even so, she had rescued Yukina all by herself.

“She said something similar to what Akatsuki-senpai said. When I asked her why she was saving me, she said, ‘Do I need a reason?’”

Yukina practically crawled up the distorted stairway, arriving right beneath the altar.

Yukina had been happy when Kojou had said he would save Celesta. Without hesitation, he said he’d save an abominable girl to be sacrificed to a dark god. To Yukina, it was as if he’d been talking about her.

“Thanks to her, I became a Sword Shaman and met you and senpai. That is—”

—*my reason for saving you*, Yukina was about to say, but Yukina’s body was blown away the instant she touched the altar. Vine-like tentacles punched holes through the temple wall as they stretched, bearing down on Yukina’s body.

“Plain Girl—?!”

Celesta let up a shrill cry. Before her eyes, a dazzling glow reached out like a blade.

The glow came from Yukina's spear.

Poising the weapon, Yukina rose up, rending the tentacles asunder.

However, hers was a desperate battle. Yukina was wounded, exhausted, and had little spiritual energy remaining, and the dark god's barrier held an inexhaustible supply of divine essence. Fight or not, the end result was evident: At that rate, Yukina would die.

"Stop already! You can't defeat a god by yourself! Don't you understand that —?!"

"I do."

Yukina smiled. She'd known that from the beginning.

Yukina did not have the power to completely halt the dark god from materializing. But having reached the altar, the egg would be forced to destroy the magical pathways it had painstakingly constructed in the process. The longer Yukina fought, the more divine essence the egg would lose.

That would delay the dark god's materialization. She'd earn every second she could. Time until *he* could recover—

"I know that I cannot win by myself. However, I have watched him all this time, so I know I am not alone in trying to save you. He'll come. I know he will —"

"Yuki...na..."

Celesta's lips trembled a little. A glint of will, supposedly lost, returned to her eyes.

As Celesta floated upside down, one of her arms faintly began to move. She stretched her hand forward, toward the surface of the altar that bound her—

Then, the instant Celesta's fingertips touched the altar's exterior, the entire temple seemed to shudder. The twists in gravity that had caused Yukina such anguish vanished. The temple returned to its proper form.

The floor was now only a floor. The walls were now only walls.

Pulled down by gravity, Celesta tumbled onto the altar's surface.

“Oww...”

“Celesta!”

The tentacles assaulting Yukina dissipated. With Celesta collapsed, Yukina cut one final tentacle and rushed to her side. Celesta was too exhausted to stand on her own power, but she was all right.

The temple shook heavily once more.

Yukina realized that the entire world was shaking.

Having lost the sacrifice at the center of the world, the sorcerous device to materialize the dark god was no longer functioning. The vast divine essence that had been barely kept under control to that point had begun to stir in irregular ways.

At that rate, with the dark god unable to take physical form, the pent-up energy would be released on its own. The resulting phenomenon would be a divine essence explosion.

At absolute minimum, damage would be severe in a ten-kilometer radius, enough to ensure Itogami Island’s annihilation.

And then—

“Celesta...?!”

Yukina’s breath caught when she realized that Celesta was climbing back onto the altar.

Celesta was trying to return to the center of the barrier after only just finally being freed from it. Yukina instantly turned around, trying to stop her, but the upward curl of the corners of Celesta’s lips said *No need for your concern*.

“I’m all right...Plain Girl. I’ll manage somehow...”

In anguish, Yukina stopped moving, a hand still outstretched toward her.

Celesta was the one who’d summoned the egg. It had synchronized with her despair to begin materializing Zazalamagiu. Put another way, she, the bride of Zazalamagiu, was the only one who could stop him from taking physical form.

Of course, there was no proof she could pull it off. Celesta couldn’t have been

confident of it.

But the fact even a slim possibility remains means I need to trust her—, Yukina told herself, almost like a prayer. But—

Boom went the golden altar, smashing apart, almost as if to trample Yukina's prayer underfoot.

"—Wha—?!"

The altar and the stairs leading to it were both broken.

Huge cracks emerged from the temple's stonework floor, almost as if it had been smashed by an unseen ax.

Impeded by those cracks, the distance between Yukina and Celesta widened once more.

The temple's floor had been sliced apart and the altar smashed by an invisible slash with overwhelming destructive might. Yukina knew that the attack had come from a tactical magical device.

"I suppose I will say...well done, civilian. Thanks to you, we got into the sacrifice chamber."

Yukina heard a cold voice resembling a machine.

A tall woman wearing a fur-trimmed coat was standing at the entrance to the temple. Waving her left hand above her head, she coldly glared down at the two girls.

The CSA special forces major, Angelica Hermida, quietly stepped forward.

5

In a quiet cabin on a giant cruise ship—

Inside that cramped, dimly lit linen room was Kojou, unable to move.

Behind him was an all but naked homunculus girl—

And in front was his silver-haired, blue-eyed female junior, pressed against Kojou in very immodest attire.

Sandwiched between the two, Kojou couldn't move a single fingertip. After all, if he clumsily stirred against the girls, he'd end up seeing various things that were not proper to view.

"Ahh...how long do you all intend to stay there like that?"

It was then that Kojou heard someone's voice from very close. The voice came from the linen room floor—about thirty centimeters above it, to be more precise.

It was a liquid-metal life-form about the size of the fairy—Nina Adelard, the self-proclaimed Great Alchemist of Yore.

"You're...Nina?! Y-you saw that?!"

"Indeed. Intently, from beginning to end." She cleared her throat.

Kojou groaned, raising an incoherent voice.

Nina nodded solemnly in the manner of one wise to the ways of the world.

"Well, rest at ease. Appearances aside, my lips are not loose. I am a metallic life-form, after all. If you take firm responsibility as a man, I shall not do anything cross as Kanon's guardian."

"R-responsibility...?"

For no particular reason, Kojou felt nervous as he murmured the word.

Kanon, resting limply in Kojou's arms up to that point, finally lifted her head. Her eyes met Kojou's up close, making her cheeks flush faintly red. It was the expression of someone just remembering what she'd been doing and unsure of just what expression she should have on her face.

"Um... It's... Sorry, Kanase."

Kojou awkwardly bowed his head to her.

Kanon politely straightened her back and said, "I... I was very clumsy..."

"No, you weren't clumsy at all, actually. Thanks, you were a big help."

Kojou averted his eyes from Kanon's undressed figure as he let his honest appraisal trickle out. Kanon blinked in visible surprise as she gazed back at Kojou's body.

“Akatsuki, your wounds...”

“Yeah. That’s thanks to you.”

Kojou smiled and rose to his feet. He didn’t feel dizzy or in pain. His lost demonic energy had been recovered, and his entire body coursed with a strange sense of exhilaration. Kanon, inheriting the blood of the Aldegian royal line, was a frighteningly powerful spirit medium. Her exceptionally pure spiritual energy was high-grade sustenance for the Beast Vassals sleeping within his flesh.

“—I wanted...to ask you to take care of Yukina and Miss Celesta.”

Kanon hugged her stripped-off clothing in front of her breasts as she spoke.

“I know,” said Kojou, looking into her eyes and nodding.

He opened the cabin door and left.

Immediately in front, he could see the huge sphere that resembled a speckled egg. Countless vines poured out from the sphere as if it were a waterfall, lodging into the artificial ground of Itogami Island as they continued eating away at the materials there.

The sphere’s diameter already exceeded a hundred meters. But there was clearly something off about its state, which ought to have still been expanding.

The dense divine essence swirling around inside the sphere was astir, and the boundary between it and normal space shuddered, almost in agony. Something was going on inside the dark god’s barrier. As far as the summoning spell was concerned, it was an unexpected, and fatal, flaw.

To Kojou and the others, it was a good omen to be welcomed with open arms.

Well, then... Kojou raised his right arm above his head. He would cut off the egg’s supply of magical energy in one shot, then and there—

“—C’mon over, Beast Vassal Number Seven, Kiffa Ater!”

The miasma Kojou scattered about distorted the atmosphere, creating a sword out of thin air. It was ridiculously huge, with a blade over a hundred meters long—and intelligent.

Properly speaking, its shape was similar to an ancient weapon known as a Vajra sword, said to be used by the gods to strike down devils.

But Kojou wasn't after its maximum power. What he sought was precision.

He guided the accelerating sword toward the space between Itogami Island's coast and the speckled sphere. Falling at supersonic speed, an enormous shock wave was created; the pressurized air enveloped the sword with incandescent flames.

This Beast Vassal was specialized for destroying a single target, and in that role, its might was tremendous.

The great sword transformed into a giant beam of light, grazing the edge of the speckled sphere as it made it as far as the sea. To protect Itogami Island from the effects, Kojou released his summons of the Beast Vassal just before striking the surface, but even so, the wake of the falling shock wave stirred up incredibly strong blast winds. Ironically, what cushioned the island from that were the tentacles spewed out by the sphere. All the tentacles that had fused with the isle were severed in a single blow, greatly rocking the huge sphere.

Cut off from its steady supply of matter, even a passerby could tell that the egg was in dire straits. The slice from Kojou's Beast Vassal left a crack on the sphere's surface, and its very diameter seemed to have shrunk ever so slightly. The restorative power of normal space had begun to exceed the rate at which the dark god's barrier ate into it.

The divine essence inside the barrier became even more disturbed, and the rate of change increased further.

The sphere tried stretching out new vine-like tentacles to resume consuming Itogami Island, but the tentacles were shot out with less vigor. And then...

"Let us go, Kanon—!"

"Yes, director!"

With Kanon back in her clothes, Nina, embraced by her arms, unleashed a ruthless ray of light—a heavy particle beam bombardment.

The tentacles' magical energy absorption ability was useless against a particle

beam—a purely physical attack. The slash of the incandescent beam burned the green tentacles down one after another.

A new tentacle shot out toward the source of the attack—Kanon and Nina. This, in turn, was struck down by the Beast Vassal at Astarte’s command. The tentacle bounced off its arm, covered in Divine Oscillation Effect, and then Nina’s beam burned it to a crisp.

“Kojou, leave this side to me,” Nina asserted, smiling proudly.

Astarte’s Beast Vassal, boasting absolute defensive power, combined with Nina’s absurd attack strength, itself fueled by Kanon’s high-inexhaustible spiritual energy. Their collective abilities put the egg at an overwhelming disadvantage.

Recognizing this, Kojou nodded firmly.

“Astarte, please!”

“Accepted—”

The giant arm of Astarte’s Beast Vassal grasped Kojou’s body. It then proceeded to wind up and hurl Kojou over the shoulder, much like a fastball.

“Execute, Rhododactylos.”

Boom! Astarte launched Kojou with incredible velocity. Of course, the target was the enormous, speckled sphere floating in midair.

“Oooooo—!”

Kojou’s face went pale as he gritted his teeth, enduring the ferocious acceleration.

And then, he plunged into the dark god’s world.

It was a world of densely concentrated divine essence raging like a tempest. Beneath him, he saw an enormous ruin. He detected raw magical energy coursing in the spaces between vine-covered stone pillars, almost like a complex electrical circuit. The sorcerous ritual to materialize the dark god was underway.

The ruin itself was a giant sorcerous device. When Kojou grasped this, a smile

came over his lips.

There was no need to think deeply about it. His task was obvious.

If the world existed solely to summon the dark god, he merely needed to rip it to pieces.

“Glad they made it so simple! C’mon over, Al-Nasl Minium!!”

Kojou summoned a new Beast Vassal as he descended toward the stonework temple before him. The scarlet bicorn manifested, unleashing an incredible shock wave with its roar.

Buffeted by the blast winds, Kojou accelerated further.

And so he went—to begin the destruction of the world.

6

Special Operations Detachment 17 of the CSA Army—

At Angelica Hermida’s command, the Zenforce troops surrounded the temple in an organized formation.

Angelica Hermida served as the vanguard, advancing to single-handedly secure the target. Her one sniper held back to provide fire support. The remaining two members blocked off the temple’s entrance, securing Angelica’s avenue of escape. They had executed many such missions in the past, spilling much blood in the process—the blood of their enemies and the blood of their allies. Angelica was not known as Bloodstained for nothing.

The history of the Confederate States of America was one of war. In the first place, the CSA was a nation forged via a war of independence with the European North Atlantic Empire and armed clashes with the North American Union.

Economic issues were the primary causes of those wars, but discrimination against demons loomed behind them. The CSA was not a signatory to the Holy Ground Treaty seeking peaceful coexistence between man and demon. The CSA had a pure-blooded human policy: As such, demons were inferior beings that

ought to be eradicated root and branch.

The CSA, isolated among nations for this extreme discriminatory policy, prioritized military might above all else. For national self-preservation, it was constantly intervening in conflicts all over the globe, because that was necessary to preserve the global military power balance.

Such military interventions were primarily conducted by the Zenforce members. In addition, they were very loyal to their nation. And they did not fear death.

One such member of Zenforce—Bouiller, the man with the sunglasses—emitted a light from his mechanical eyes as he checked the area for disturbances.

“...What’s with the impact just now?” he asked through the transmitter embedded in his head.

“Dunno. Can’t see a whole lot like this.”

From the shadow of a stone pillar nine meters away, the man with the prosthetic hand, Mathis, replied.

Certainly, visibility inside the temple was poor, as it was obstructed by stone pillars and vines. Yet, surely Mathis had noticed it, too.

Something must have been done to the barrier’s outer shell from out in the real world.

The giant barrier giving birth to the dark god...was swaying. It was as if its supply of magical energy and matter, obtained from eating into Itogami Island, had been cut off.

Some powerful attack had cut off its supply of magical energy, severing the world from Itogami Island. On top of that, the world’s outer shell had probably been damaged. The attack was powerful enough to shake a world created by a dark god, even if it was in an immature, unmaterialized state.

Even though the two soldiers were supposed to be coolheaded fighting machines, that fact unnerved them ever so slightly. It was because of their wealth of combat experience that they instinctively understood: That power

would become a hindrance to their mission—

Then, as if to prove their instincts true, a new distortion occurred inside the barrier.

What emerged overhead was a scarlet bicorn, as if wildly raging wind had taken physical form.

Largely indiscriminate, the vibrating shock waves it unleashed assailed the ruin. Stone pillars snapped, and the giant inlaid stones of the floor smashed apart. The sorcerous device runes carved into the ruin vanished, and a vast amount of accumulated divine essence leaked out. It was obviously a situation they could not ignore.

“Boland, report! Boland!” Bouiller shouted through his transmitter.

He could tell that a vampire’s Beast Vassal had appeared above their heads. The dense demonic energy it radiated was on par with the dark god’s divine essence. He had a guess as to its master, as well: the Fourth Primogenitor—the World’s Mightiest Vampire.

However, he ought to have been on death’s door, incredibly worn down from his grievous wounds. Even if you could not destroy the immutable primogenitors, it was possible to whittle their power down temporarily. It was precisely that knowledge that had made Bouiller and the others unafraid to make him an enemy. Taking out his heart with a sniper rifle ought to have put a damper on his strength.

But this Fourth Primogenitor controlling the scarlet Beast Vassal was different from the one they had first encountered.

He had not merely recovered his demonic energy. The boy knew who and what Celesta Ciate really was, and he understood Angelica Hermida’s objective. He had hesitated before from the uncertainty of facing an unknown enemy in a crazy situation. Ironically, Celesta running amok had liberated him from all his shackles. Now, he was free to use the malevolent powers of the Fourth Primogenitor, rivaling those of even natural disasters, in whatever ways he pleased, for the sole objective of rescuing Celesta Ciate.

That boy is dangerous, thought Bouiller. *We have to take him out one more*

time. However...

“Oh, by Boland, do you mean this wooden puppet?”

The one replying to Bouiller’s message was a vampire with a handsome face reminiscent of a cold knife.

The large-framed soldier, his flesh turned into machine, tumbled at the vampire’s feet. The lower half of the soldier’s body had been annihilated, burned away by incandescent flame; both arms had been ripped off his body with incredible force. Even Sorcerous Troopers could not survive such wounds.

“Tobias Jagan...so you’re the one who...!”

“He is a sniper who has shot and killed hundreds of innocent human beings. Ending his life without making him suffer was more mercy than he deserved.”

Jagan responded to Bouiller’s bloodthirsty murmur with a declaration dripping with scorn.

Bouiller ripped his clothes off without a word, exposing the silver magical devices embedded in his shoulders: metal plates that created an incandescent shimmer.

“—Wait, Bouiller. I’ll take him. Cover me.”

It was the other man, Mathis, who held Bouiller in check.

He was already activating the magical devices embedded in both his prosthetic hands. In the area around Mathis, sixteen gauntlets appeared, floating in midair. The gauntlets were gripping a variety of weapons: swords and axes, spears and sickles, and even large-caliber pistols and machine guns.

“My,” Jagan said with a show of false admiration. “What interesting arms you have there. Convenient for scratching one’s back.”

Mathis’s face contorted in unconcealed rage at his sorcerous devices being portrayed as such inconsequential items.

“Don’t mock me, vampire. You’re already in my Oracle Bombsight. There’s nowhere you can run!”

The gauntlets controlled by the special forces trooper danced in the air as

they surrounded Jagan. The firearms opened fire as the countless weapons thrust in one after another. The force and accuracy of the attacks were as if they came from a grand master. Furthermore, even if the gauntlets created by the sorcerous device were destroyed, they were immediately restored. No one could escape from the onslaught—not even a vampire noble.

“—I see, quite an amusing sideshow. What a pity.”

However, Jagan wore a cold expression as he stood unscathed.

He wasn't evading Mathis's attacks. All the gauntlet's attacks missed. Rather, it was Mathis who missed. He couldn't attack Jagan. He couldn't pin down exactly where Jagan was.

“Tobias Jagan... Damn you, you did something to my—”

“Rather late of you to notice. Did you truly believe a talisman was enough for you to escape from my Wadjet—?”

The tedium was plain as day in Jagan's voice.

Mathis, the gauntlet user, had already seen Jagan's Wadjet, which was actually a mind control Beast Vassal that dwelled in Jagan's eyes. Wadjet embedded itself into the enemy until its master released it from its summons. A mere talisman was no defense against it.

After all, defeating a vampire's Beast Vassal required nullifying the demonic energy like a Schneewaltzer, or smashing it with greater demonic power, as the Third Primogenitor had once done—

Jagan ordered Wadjet to attack. The gauntlets purportedly under Mathis's control turned on their owner all at once. There was no time to turn the sorcerous device off. Before he could, every weapon bore down upon him, piercing deeply into his flesh.

“Not yet, vampire—!”

Jagan, certain of his foe's demise, sensed his control of Wadjet weaken momentarily. Right then, Mathis, on the verge of death, leaped for Jagan. Countless gauntlets materialized once more, restraining every inch of the vampire's body. Then:

“Bouiller, now!”

Before Mathis’s lips even moved to say *Do it*, the sorcerous devices in Bouiller’s shoulders unleashed their incandescent shimmer. Simultaneously, the explosives in Mathis’s own body exploded.

Incredible flames and blast winds enveloped Jagan. “We did it,” Bouiller murmured, breathing raggedly.

However, the flames that ought to have burned the vampire to cinders swirled before Jagan’s eyes, changing form to a giant bird of prey. Jagan smiled cruelly from the other side of the fire.

“Ensen, is it? The Flaming Fan. You possess a rare sorcerous device. Your teamwork was not bad, either. But...too weak.”

The flaming bird of prey transformed into a ray and leaped. A great pillar of fire burst up, centered on the place where Bouiller stood. With a great blast, the flames spread, reducing the surrounding area to ash.

Jagan dissipated his Beast Vassal, but the flames raged on. However, he did not see Bouiller’s corpse anywhere. All that remained were slightly melted fragments from his shattered sorcerous devices—

Bouiller had fled.

“So much time and trouble... Ah, well...”

Even as he muttered in annoyance, Jagan suddenly looked overhead. There, a giant silver shelled beast was materializing—a Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor.

Kojou Akatsuki had likely turned the temple’s outer wall to mist, annihilating it, and had made his way to the sacrifice chamber.

“Tch,” went Jagan, roughly clicking his tongue as he stepped forward.

He had no intention of lending Kojou Akatsuki a hand. Merely breathing the same air as that man disgusted him. This was not, in any way, a shared battle; he simply didn’t care for his prey being stolen. That was all.

Jagan headed into the temple telling himself that, seemingly for his own benefit.

The area around the temple had already begun rocking ferociously.

Celesta having descended from the altar was not the sole cause. Disturbances had arisen both inside and outside Zazalamagiu's barrier. The outer shell consuming the physical world had been damaged, and its supply of magical energy from the outside had been severed. And the temple itself, constructed from the dark god's magical energy, was being destroyed.

There was only one person capable of such reckless deeds—the Fourth Primogenitor, Kojou Akatsuki.

However, that realization brought no relief to Yukina's face, for the woman in the fur-trimmed coat was still quietly gazing at the two girls.

"Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency, you called yourself. Hand over Celesta Ciate. I do not desire to kill any more civilians than I have to..."

Angelica Hermida calmly held her right arm high.

She, too, had surely sensed the disturbance outside the temple. However, there was no change in the female soldier's expression. She was confident that she could control and overcome whatever that disturbance was.

"What do you intend to do with Celesta...?" Yukina asked, poisoning her spear.

Her polished senses as a Sword Shaman told her that the foe before her eyes was dangerous. If she let up, she'd be crushed by her opponent's overwhelming pressure.

This was a human soldier unlike any demon—and different from any foe Yukina had yet faced. Yukina's spear could not completely fend off Angelica's attacks. For that matter, she even wondered if Angelica had shown off her full power up to that point.

Even so, Yukina could not retreat. She was the only one who could protect Celesta then and there.

"In answering your question, what are *your* demands?" the female soldier inquired. "We would collect her and transport her to the Chaos Zone. Surely

these are desirable terms for you?”

“That is not—”

“It is possible. That is why I am here.”

Angelica replied with the bare minimum of words required. Her blunt tone of voice announced the end of the unexpected negotiation.

“I will count to five. Vanish from my sight within that time. Otherwise, you will die. Five...four...”

“Plain Girl...!”

Celesta shouted from behind Yukina. *Leave me here and run*, her grief-stricken voice seemed to say, but Yukina would have none of it.

Thanks to the crevice delving into the floor, she could not shield Celesta. In that situation, she had but one way to protect Celesta—attacking Angelica first.

Yukina kicked off the floor, leaping with all her might. However, Angelica easily evaded the mighty charge.

“...three...two...”

Angelica emotionlessly continued counting down. She was upholding the little time she had given to Yukina. In other words, if that time limit was exceeded, she would attack without mercy.

“...one... A pity.”

Angelica murmured without even a single change in her expression. However, the female soldier did not swing her right arm downward.

Before she could attack, the exterior temple wall burst apart with incredible force.

The vast demonic energy scattered in every direction and the silver mist filling up her field of vision made Yukina gasp and look over her shoulder. And there, amid the obviously excessive destruction, stood a young man surrounded by mist, wearing a bloodstained parka and a languid expression.

“Sorry for making you wait, Himeragi...!”

Kojou Akatsuki’s eyes shone crimson as he made a ferocious, fang-bared

smile.

For a brief time, Yukina gazed at him in abject shock. Behind Kojou, the Beast Vassals he had called out were destroying the ruin to the fullest extent possible. It was without purpose or restraint, destruction for destruction's sake. *He's overdoing it*, she thought.

Certainly, this would prevent the dark god from materializing or consuming the real world, but one false move might well make the accumulated dragon line energy go berserk. *This is why*, thought Yukina. *This is why I can't take my eyes off this boy for a single moment.*

"How's Celesta?!"

"Safe! However, later when we get back, I will be lecturing you, senpai—"

The indignant expression on Yukina as she spoke those words suddenly froze over in fear. Through a gap in the enshrouding mists, she saw Angelica Hermida lower her right hand.

The silver mist parted as she unleashed her invisible slash. The unseen giant blade was aimed at Kojou Akatsuki, standing there defenseless.

"Senpai—!"

Yukina let out a brief shriek.

The invisible blade split the floor of giant inlaid stones, severing Kojou's body apart across his shoulder—or so anyone would have thought. But in that moment, a beautiful, gemstone-like glimmer arose directly in front of him, making a high-pitched, earsplitting *ting!*

The invisible blade touched that light, and immediately after, fresh blood scattered with incredible force.

Yukina's eyes opened wide, seemingly unable to process the sight before her.

"What...?"

It was Angelica Hermida who spewed blood and fell.

Kojou continued standing in place, unharmed.

"...the...hell?!"

With her coat and her torso sliced apart, Angelica tumbled to the temple floor with a *thud*.

Kojou had done nothing. The invisible blade the female soldier had unleashed had bounced right back at her. Angelica Hermida had fallen to her very own attack.

“...Does this...end it, I wonder...?”

From the tone with which Kojou murmured, even he was at a loss.

Angelica, reinforced with machinery, was still alive, although her body had been sliced in half at the waist. She didn’t even seem to be in pain. But she probably couldn’t continue fighting like that.

In her shape, she could not stop Kojou and the others.

The fight was over. There was no longer any reason to stay inside that world. They’d take Celesta and get out. They could figure out how to stop the energy from running wild afterward.

With such thoughts, Kojou stepped forward, but suddenly—

He heard a voice quietly laugh. It came from Angelica Hermida.

“It’s not over... It’s not over yet, Fourth Primogenitor. Don’t underestimate my unit. A mere demon won’t—”

Kojou looked back at the female soldier, shocked by her defiant words. At some point, a new figure had come to stand beside the fallen, gravely wounded Angelica—a large-framed soldier with mechanized eyes.

It was one of Angelica’s subordinates, the one she’d called Bouiller.

“—Major. Sorry I’m late.”

With those words, he crouched at Angelica’s side. He had considerable wounds all over his body; the sorcerous devices embedded in both shoulders had been destroyed as well. It was to him that the female soldier looked up, asking:

“Only you, Bouiller?”

“Yes. Boland and Mathis were taken down by Tobias Jagan—” Bouiller shook

his head slightly.

For a single, brief moment, Angelica closed her eyes, seemingly to mourn her fallen men. Then, the next instant, she smiled beautifully as she reached out with her right hand.

“Is that so? Then, I shall take you, Bouiller—”

“So that our nation may stand forever.”

He nodded, satisfied, as he took Angelica’s hand. Then, he kissed the back of her hand, like a knight swearing fealty to his liege.

Kojou and the others watched the strange, highly out-of-place gesture in silence. And it was Jagan, running into the temple, who broke that silence.

“Stop that woman, Kojou Akatsuki!”

“Huh?!”

Jagan’s lips twisted in their haste, but Kojou could not immediately comprehend his words. Angelica Hermida was on the brink of death, and all her subordinate had done was touch her right hand. He didn’t know what Jagan was so afraid of.

“Angelica Hermida’s right arm uses the Embrace of the Queen!”

Jagan shouted in Kojou’s direction as he summoned his own Beast Vassal. He unleashed his incandescent raptor toward the subordinate standing astride the fallen Angelica. But...

“Gah...?!”

Fresh blood scattered about, and it was Jagan who fell, his torso deeply slashed. The enemy had assailed him just before he could make his own Beast Vassal attack.

“—Jagan?!”

With Kojou rooted to the spot, Jagan, unable to endure the slash, dropped to his knees before Kojou’s eyes.

The invisible blade had left a wound as if from a giant ax. The technique belonged to Angelica, purportedly fallen and gravely wounded.

“And that was the Left Hand of Decapitation...Tobias Jagan.”

The incandescent bird of prey Jagan had summoned dissipated.

A tall, bizarre figure stood on the other side of the lingering flames. The humanoid’s head was that of a beautiful woman. However, beneath both her arms was another set of arms and a stout, male torso. Angelica had fused with the body of her own subordinate to replace her sliced-off lower body.

“What—? She stole her own teammate’s body...!”

Kojou exclaimed as he noticed the change in the female soldier’s appearance.

Apparently, the sorcerous device embedded in her right arm embraced the other party’s flesh, with the effect of taking his flesh into her own. Angelica had *consumed* her subordinate, turning him into a part of her.

“My right hand turns everything I desire into a part of my flesh. Zenforce is a unit established solely for my sake. My subordinates’ flesh and blood are nothing more than spare parts for me. I kill friend and foe alike—hence, why I am Bloodstained Angelica.”

Angelica spoke without emotion. She was neither bragging nor pitying herself—she was simply explaining to instill fear into Kojou and the others. In her mind, even robbing the flesh of her loyal subordinates was just part of the process required to carry out her mission.

The machines embedded in Angelica’s body wriggled around like independent living creatures. Circuits were switching over as she connected to the artificial organs inside her subordinate’s body. The sorcerous device for fusion was no simple thing. Only Sorcerous Troopers, their entire bodies converted to machines, could pull off such an extreme feat.

“Why you...!”

Kojou bared his fangs, horrified at the exceedingly bizarre state of the pair. He strongly clenched his fist and launched a punch at the now-grotesque female soldier.

Angelica, seemingly knowing from the start what Kojou would do, raised her left hand high. Suddenly, Kojou realized what she was after. Now that he was

bent on attacking, he couldn't use that strange reflect ability—

The sorcerous device embedded in her left arm activated, forming an invisible blade.

“—Senpai!”

But before she could swing the blade downward, Yukina wedged herself between Kojou and Angelica. She thrust her silver spear forward like an arrow, impaling the female soldier's left wrist.

The sorcerous device in Angelica's left wrist shattered, releasing a shock wave like a discharge of static energy. The invisible blade dissipated. She could no longer use the sorcerous device she had called the Left Hand of Decapitation.

Seeing this, the female soldier smiled, satisfied for some reason.

“I foresaw that you would move in that way, Sword Shaman.”

Angelica yanked out the spear, not caring that it mangled her left wrist in the process.

Yukina's expression stiffened. She realized that Angelica's objective had been to draw her away from Celesta.

Using the legs she had stolen from her subordinate, Angelica leaped with tremendous acceleration.

Celesta was on the other end. As Celesta stood still, petrified with fear, Angelica violently embraced her: the bride of Zazalamagiu, with her right arm—

“This is the true power of the Embrace of the Queen—the pride of the CSA.”

Angelica's right arm emitted a glow, the light swallowing Celesta whole—

8

An ominous sound filled the world.

The earth shook— No, the dimension Kojou and the others were inside was rumbling.

The vast ruin had begun to vanish. The stonework temple, existing so vividly

before, suddenly became insubstantial, shuddering and vanishing with barely a whimper.

“Angelica Hermida...”

However, in that moment, Kojou’s mind was too preoccupied to care.

Before Kojou’s and Yukina’s eyes, Angelica’s form changed once more.

Her skin lost all color, and was now dyed black—literally—like the dark of night. Her body lost its humanoid contours, expanding as it changed shape. She transformed into something like a giant bird, and at the same time, like a serpent. She might have even become the chick of some foul beast, freshly hatched from its malevolent egg. The only vestiges of her humanity were three arms, now covered in obsidian scales.

The black scales coating her entire body were covered in golden magical runes resembling subtle electrical circuitry.

Celesta was at the center of the circuit. With her four limbs buried in the monster’s brow, she was frozen like a statue, her eyes remaining open in terror.

“What have you...done to Celesta...?!”

Kojou’s entire body shook with anger and despair. Angelica Hermida had used the Embrace of the Queen to bring Celesta into her. She’d obtained the icon of the dark god. Whatever she might look like, Angelica had succeeded in her mission.

With Kojou rooted where he stood, he heard a woman’s voice behind him, one with a small lisp. It was Natsuki’s voice.

“So she’s fused with the bride of Zazalamagiu—”

Carrying a lacy, extravagant parasol, Natsuki looked up at the transformed female soldier with what seemed like pity.

“I see... You reproduced the sorcerous device inscribed in the Temple of Ciate and transplanted it inside your body, haven’t you, Bloodstained Angelica?”

“Transplanted...the sorcerous device...?”

Blood drained from Kojou’s face as he realized the meaning of Natsuki’s

words.

The dark god had not materialized in spite of Celesta summoning the egg. That was because the Temple of Ciate, the sorcerous device for materializing the dark god, did not exist on Itogami Island.

Hence, the dark god's egg had constructed that other-dimensional world, going as far as to eat away at Itogami Island to magically reproduce the ruin. Kojou and the others had destroyed the false ruin to prevent the dark god's materialization. That should have worked.

But if the inside of Angelica Hermida's body was equipped with a real sorcerous device the same as the Temple of Ciate, then—

The grotesque monster told the tale in Angelica Hermida's voice:

“The Temple of Ciate was a magical device constructed with technology from over a thousand years ago. Using current sorcerous technology, such size is not necessary for the device. It is possible to embed the entire thing into a single body—mine, in the form of an integrated chip the size of a one-centimeter square.”

In so doing, she expressed her complete control over the power of the dark god. Having taken Celesta, the bride, into herself, the artificial god was under her dominion.

“Recovery of the sacrifice was successful. There were casualties, but that was expected. There is no problem in executing the mission,” the grotesque monster declared in a mechanical tone bereft of intonation.

The destruction of the temple accelerated. The barrier maintained by the dark god's magical power dissipated, returning them to the real world. Kojou and the others, hurled into normal physical space, were pulled down by gravity, falling onto Itogami Island's coast, which—eaten into by the dark god's egg—was now a broken ruin.

Natsuki manipulated space to teleport them to a safe location, whereupon Yukina landed safely. For his part, Kojou, who looked set to fall into the sea, somehow managed to land in a crouch on exposed building materials.

Then, Angelica, transformed into the dark god, spread black wings, looming

over Kojou and the others from high in the sky.

“However, public revelation that my nation was involved in the advent of the Deity of Darkness is undesirable. Accordingly, I will eliminate all witnesses.”

Shrouded in obsidian scales, the deity’s arms became enveloped in pitch-black flames. Their incredible temperature made the atmosphere shudder. The grotesque monster grasped those black flames as it glared at Kojou.

“The dark god Zazalamagiu governs death. Burn in the hellish flames of the dark sun—”

The black fire, completely bereft of light, fell silently toward the ground.

The condensed magical power held enough heat to burn away not just Kojou and the others, but the entire harbor area. The black flames scorched the ground, and white bubbles frothed on the boiling surface of the sea.

But that intense, destructive heat never reached Itogami Island.

“Like hell you will, Monster Girl—”

A light arose before Kojou’s eyes. It was a huge wall of beautiful gemstones.

The black flames released by the dark god dissipated the moment they touched the pale, transparent wall, seemingly sucked into it. Simultaneously, the gemstone wall shattered, turning into countless crystals that showered the dark god head-on.

“What...?!”

The sharp gemstone fragments were imbued with the same temperature as the black flames the dark god had unleashed. The grotesque monster was unnerved at being bathed in the might of its own attack.

“...You all knew, didn’t you? That Celesta was abducted to be a sacrifice, that her memories were stolen, that she was gonna be killed...” Kojou audibly ground his teeth as he glared at the female soldier-turned-dark god. The vast demonic energy welling in his entire body made the very air creak.

Vattler said that there were only two ways to stop Zazalamagiu. Namely, either kill Celesta and stop the dark god from materializing, or defeat the dark god after its descent. And should the dark god descend, Celesta would be

annihilated, unable to endure the blow.

However, Angelica Hermida merging with Celesta had thrown those preliminary conditions askew. Angelica had transformed into the dark god, but she had not lost her own will in the process. If that was the reality, it was possible that Celesta remained intact, both in mind and in body. If so, his task was obvious.

“So you left Celesta to rot, killed all the priests, and on top of that, you still wanna use the god’s power as a tool of war! Then I’ll just beat you down and save Celesta. From here on, this is *my* fight!”

Kojou deployed the gemstone wall. Once again, the dark god unleashed black flames, and both their supernatural energies clashed. The fragments of the shattered wall became bullets beyond counting, launching a counterattack against the grotesque monster.

But the dark god that had unleashed the flames had already vanished from Kojou’s sight. Circling to Kojou’s rear, it scattered new flames from his blind spot.

Kojou reacted too slowly to create another wall in time. Then, with Kojou gone rigid, the flames parted without warning.

A dazzling, pale glow had become a giant blade, slicing the pitch-black flames apart. And that blade of light was the radiance of the Divine Oscillation Effect from a Schneewaltzer—the secret weapon of the Lion King Agency.

“No, senpai. This is *our* fight—!”

Twirling her silver spear, Yukina stood with her back against Kojou, covering his rear.

At her words, Kojou nodded firmly and raised his right arm high.

“I, Kojou Akatsuki, heir to the Kaleid Blood, release thee from thy bonds—!”

Fresh blood scattered from Kojou’s right arm which, together with a ray of light, transformed into an enormous beast. This was a dense enough mass of swirling demonic energy to possess a will of its own. It was an absurdly huge bighorn sheep vested with a body of diamonds.

This was the Fourth Primogenitor's new Beast Vassal—Agnus Dei, the Unstained and Unerring Divine Sheep.

“—C'mon over, Beast Vassal Number One, Mesarthim Adamas!”

Together with Kojou's shout, the holy sheep roared, scattering gemstone-like crystals in the process.

The hallowed sheep of diamonds stood unscathed against any attack, reflecting the wounds it would have borne upon the attacker. It was a Beast Vassal that represented the vampiric curse of immortality.

Kojou's Beast Vassal created a wall of infinite gemstones that filled the sky behind the grotesque monster, seemingly to hold it in check. If the dark god attacked the wall, the might of its attack would rebound upon it.

The dark god could no longer harm Itogami Island without harming itself; nor was escape an option any longer.

Angelica, in her dark god form, glared at Kojou, who had interfered with her mission, and roared.

The grotesque monster spread its black wings and plunged.

Kojou's expression hardened as he looked up at the pitch-black giant drawing near. The dark god was using its own enormous body in an attempt to squash Kojou and the others flat.

Having already used the Beast Vassal to prevent the dark god's escape, Kojou could not deploy a new wall. Nor could Yukina's spear provide any defense against a non-magical, purely physical attack.

Kojou tried to summon a different Beast Vassal to strike down the dark god, but its attack was faster. The huge, completely black body crashed into the broken coast, smashing Kojou along with it—

Or it would have, save for the giant, silver-glimmering golem instantly bringing its overwhelming mass to a halt.

“Anmauth!”

The steel-wrought golem punched the dark god with all its might, knocking the enormous, jet-black body back.

It was Tobias Jagan who controlled the golem. He, ostensibly collapsed from grievous wounds, pressed a hand against his wounded chest as he shouted to Kojou, “Don’t let up, Kojou Akatsuki! If she can’t defeat the Beast Vassal, of course she’ll go for its host!”

“Man, you really are stuck up—!”

“Silence! Damned fool,” Jagan growled, venting as he glared back at Kojou in annoyance. Thus, Kojou lost sight of when to actually thank him.

“Irrlicht—!”

“C’mon over, Al-Nasl Minium—!”

Jagan, promptly ignoring his feud with Kojou, summoned a new Beast Vassal. Kojou moved simultaneously. An incandescent bird of prey materialized alongside the crimson bicorn, assaulting the dark god from right and left. It was an unbelievably well-coordinated combination attack.

Surely the attack was unavoidable, but the dark god evaded it with ease. It was the same as when it had circled around Kojou’s wall earlier. The black flames unleashed by its obsidian arms shot the two Beast Vassals down.

“Absurd!”

“—It dodged *that*?!”

Jagan and Kojou exclaimed simultaneously. They commanded their wounded Beast Vassals to attack once more, but the result was the same. The grotesque monster completely read which way they would move and attacked accordingly.

It wasn’t that Angelica was drawing out Zazalamagiu’s complete power. Thanks to materializing far from the dragon lines of its native land, forced into an incomplete ritual through use of a sorcerous device, the Deity of Darkness was only able to tap into a small portion of its proper power. The fact Celesta remained in human form and Angelica retained her own will was proof enough. If they could defeat the grotesque monster now, they could surely save Celesta.

But that wasn’t going to happen if their attacks couldn’t connect. Even that very moment, the dark god was absorbing energy from the dragon lines,

gradually increasing in strength. It was only a matter of time until all hope was lost.

“I see... So that’s how it is,” Natsuki murmured, casually gazing at the sky like this was all someone else’s problem.

Her utterance reached Kojou’s irritated ears. In a tone evocative of explaining a question on a test, the small-statured witch stated to Kojou:

“Listen well, Kojou Akatsuki. A magical device capable of predicting the future is implanted in Angelica Hermida’s body. Assume she will evade any half-hearted attack.”

“Predicting the future...? You mean, just like Himeragi...?”

Kojou gasped and looked at Yukina. Her Spirit Sight allowed her to peer a moment into the future during combat, allowing her to move faster than a demon. Such was the strange secret combat ability Sword Shamans of the Lion King Agency possessed. If Angelica possessed the same ability, it was no small wonder Kojou’s and Jagan’s attacks weren’t hitting her.

“That’s how it is. You know how to proceed from here, I take it?” The corners of Natsuki’s small lips curled up in a leer.

Kojou’s and Yukina’s eyes met, and they nodded at each other.

They had no time to double-check with words. Time was precious.

Yukina set Snowdrift Wolf down without saying anything. Kojou circled around Yukina’s back, embracing her from behind. Then, the two put their right hands together.

“Senpai—”

Yukina’s face turned upward and over her shoulder, looking up at Kojou from very close. Her eyes were gentle, like someone wearing a bashful smile.

“When we have safely rescued Celesta, there is a story I want to tell you. What happened that triggered my entry into the Lion King Agency... Are you all right with that?”

“Yeah, ’course I am.”

Kojou nodded without hesitation. In that moment, the two felt like there was something connecting them together. An invisible thread seemed to link their nervous systems together, conveying their thoughts to each other through the touch of their flesh.

Together, Kojou and Yukina observed the horizon.

The pitch-black dark god hovered against a sky the color of flame.

If this Angelica who'd turned into a deity really could see the future, they just had to see further ahead than she could. But to turn that into reality, Yukina's Spirit Sight power had to beat out the power of Angelica's sorcerous device—



Yukina can do it, Kojou believed in his heart.

I will see it. Yukina was certain she could—because Kojou believed so.

“Senpai!”

“Regulus Aurum—!”

The pair’s voices overlapped. A lightning lion was summoned out of thin air, enveloped in a powerful electrical field.

It became a gleam of purple lightning, dashing through the sky in the direction Yukina pointed, biting into the dark god’s enormous frame.

The Beast Vassal’s attack, surpassing Angelica’s own predictions, made her emit a high-pitched scream. She—supposedly an emotionless fighting machine—harbored fear for the first time.

“Well done, my pupils.”

Natsuki hid her smiling lips behind her open fan.

From the shadow at her feet, she launched giant, golden chains resembling the anchor of a battleship. This was Dromi, forged by the gods—the golden sorcerous devices began dragging the pitch-black deity down to earth.

“I, Maiden of the Lion, Sword Shaman of the High God, beseech thee.”

Immediately, Yukina grasped her spear and sprinted. Alongside the chant, a vast amount of spiritual energy flowed forth, enveloping the silver spear in the glow of the Divine Oscillation Effect.

“O purifying light, O divine wolf of the snowdrift, by your steel divine will, strike down the devils before me!”

Yukina’s spear impaled the dark god’s obsidian-covered flesh.

She targeted a single spot: the sorcerous device chip embedded in Angelica’s body. She knew where the chip was located from the internal flow of the deity’s divine essence. It was a tiny integrated circuit, the size of a one-centimeter square; Yukina destroyed it with one certain blow.

In that instant, the deity lost the power that had given it physical substance.

The grotesque monster visibly shuddered.

Angelica's flesh, merged with the deity, was spat out; simultaneously, Celesta was freed from it.

Together with a roar that made the air tremble, the dark god's power began to run amok. The vast divine essence accumulated was set to be unleashed indiscriminately.

"Akatsuki!!"

Natsuki glared at Kojou as she shouted. Kojou summoned a new Beast Vassal.

"Al-Meissa Mercury—!"

The dark god was on the verge of going berserk when the quicksilver, two-headed dragon bit into its flesh. The flesh of the deity consumed by the dragons dissipated, erased along with the very space they occupied. If the dark god's divine essence was wholly released, even the holy sheep's wall would not be able to block it. So before that happened, the power of the twin-headed dragon, the Dimension Eater, flung that divine essence into some other, unknown dimension.

The pitch-black deity roared and thrashed as its flesh continued to be consumed. Wringing out the last of its remaining strength, the dark god cut its own lower half away to free itself from the dragons' twin maws.

"What the—?!"

The dark god's mangled flesh plunged toward the ground. Seeing this, nervous expressions came over Kojou and the others.

Kojou commanded Mesarthim Adamas to deploy countless walls. The dark god's body was worn down, its power depleted with each wall of light it touched. But even so, even with the deity losing its substance, it was impossible to ward off all of it.

Fragments of the dark god turned into fine shards, pouring onto Itogami Island like a meteor shower. Even the faint traces of divine essence remaining held enough might to wipe the entire island off the map.

Yukina's spear would not be enough to knock them all out of the sky, and

there was no time to summon a new Beast Vassal.

We won't make it, Kojou worried, biting his lip. But suddenly—

Countless fresh serpents appeared out of thin air and consumed the dark god's shards, not leaving a single one.

"Eh...?!"

The sudden arrival of silence made everyone present stop moving.

The dark god's divine essence had vanished from the world. At some point, the sky had also returned to its normal color.

The serpents, vast enough in number to completely bury their lines of sight, vanished back into thin air, their task complete.

Kojou didn't even need to look back. He knew who had summoned the frightening Beast Vassal.

It was the aristocrat also known as the Master of Serpents—Dimitrie Vattler, Duke of Ardeal.

"Vattler... He..."

Kojou subconsciously grimaced as he noticed the young aristocrat's approach.

On the coastline, broken and battered from the dark god's encroachment, a girl weakly sat up, her hair the color of honey.

Having lost her clothes during the fusion, she was not wearing a single stitch. Her radiant brown skin lacked any sign of major injury. She was extremely worn down, but her memories did not seem to be jumbled, either.

With her in such a state, Vattler stood still before her, smiling elegantly.

"It would seem you are safe, Celesta Ciate. I suppose I should say congratulations."

Vattler put his own coat over the naked Celesta's shoulders.

The girl with honey-colored hair looked up at him with visible surprise. Half-unconsciously, she called out the young aristocrat's name.

"...Lord...Vattler..."

He gave no reply to her address and simply walked past.

Vattler smiled pleasantly at the injured Jagan, thanked him for his hard work, and brought him along as he departed.

Kojou gawked as he watched the spectacle, like something straight out of a movie.

“...Why does it kinda sorta seem like *he* saved Celesta or something...?”

Aside from lending a hand at the last minute, Vattler had done virtually nothing. In fact, he'd seemed bent on abandoning Celesta for quite some time.

When Zazalamagiu became incarnate, the divine essence Celesta Ciate was synchronized with had departed from her, only to be consumed by Kojou's and Vattler's Beast Vassals. She was the bride of the dark god no longer.

Therefore, Vattler had surely lost all interest in her. His gentle gesture toward her was a display of indifference. Of course, Kojou thought it unlikely Celesta would understand that.

Just doesn't sit right, Kojou thought with a shake of his head.

Yukina looked at his face, giggling a little as she smiled. But her grin immediately soured into a twitching cheek of displeasure.

After all, Kojou was staring straight at the half-naked body of Celesta, who was wearing nothing but Vattler's coat.

“Senpai...how long are you going to keep staring at her like that...?”

“Wh...whaaat?! Wait a sec, that right now was just me being worried about her...!”

“Indecent,” fumed Yukina as Kojou desperately continued trying to excuse himself.

As Celesta wiped a tear from the corner of her eye, the rays of Itogami Island's setting sun shone on her beautiful, happy face.

Her briefly murmured words were stolen by a strong ocean breeze, never to reach Kojou's ears—

“Thank you...Kojou...”



OUTRO

OUTRO

That day, Asagi Aiba lay slovenly on an expensive, ergonomic chair, her chin resting on her hand in visible displeasure.

She was in Keystone Gate's Floor Zero—the special room at the center of the giant building that was itself the center of Itogami Island.

Floor Zero was a place called the server room of the Gigafloat Management Corporation—on the surface, at least. It was a completely airtight chamber within which were placed the five supercomputer cores that administered Itogami Island, the nerve center to which every network on the island was connected. The outer shell was said to be tough enough to survive water pressure at 20,000 meters under the sea or even a direct nuclear strike.

However, to Asagi, a high schooler working a mere part-time job, such unrealistic specs were worthless pieces of trivia.

“Damn that Motoki... What's the big idea, calling me over here?! I'm...so...bored!!”

Asagi set her legs up on the desk in unladylike fashion while she grumbled in annoyance.

“It's a rush job so we'll pay, and you can use the supercomputer however you want,” Motoki had said. Seduced by her childhood friend's rosy words, Asagi had gone to work, wasting a precious vacation day in the process. But all she'd ended up doing was staring into space at a desk, waiting. Out of great tedium, she'd applied for about a dozen software patents, crushed the world champion in computer chess, and hacked the surveillance cameras at Kojou's apartment building, but naturally, such ways of killing time had their limits.

“Hey, Mogwai. Are you listening? I'm getting hungry here... I'm hungry!”

Asagi flailed her limbs around like a child as she called out to the surveillance

cameras. Then, with unexpected timing, Asagi's cell phone made a noise—the tone for an arriving message.

The sender of the message was Yaze. The contents were simple. Namely: *"Today's business is all done, so you can head on home. Thanks for the hard work—"*

"Excuse me?! Geez, what the hell?!"

Asagi glared at her cell phone's screen and shouted. Behind her, she heard the sound of air draining away. The airtight lock sealing Asagi in had been released.

"Why that...! Mark my words...you'll pay for this...!" Asagi muttered as she menacingly clenched her fist.

Thus, without fanfare, did her day come to an end—



In a cabin on the giant cruise ship *Oceanus Grave II*, Dimitrie Vattler tilted a wineglass. The crimson liquid, with a whiff of iron hovering around it, swayed within his hand.

There was a tablet device placed on the table displaying a newspaper company's website. The top headline proclaimed CIVIL WAR COMES TO AN END. The rebel army in the Chaos Zone had been suppressed without the Chaos Bride needing to take to the field.

Combat had ended with a whimper and no major civilian casualties. This had the unintended effect of elevating the Third Primogenitor's stature as a stateswoman.

Evidence of the civil war being a CSA military scheme had been publicly unveiled. There were allegations that this evidence included the name of a commissioned female special forces officer who'd been wounded and taken prisoner.

As a result, the CSA had been showered with international condemnation and was instructed to pay reparations to the Chaos Zone.

As Vattler gazed out the window, a youthful vampire with a handsome,

androgynous face asked him, “Are you satisfied with the matter...? It would seem that aiding the Chaos Bride has antagonized most of the elders.”

His jade-green eyes seemed melancholic somehow as they turned toward the article on the tablet.

Dimitrie Vattler was an aristocrat native to the Warlord’s Empire, a pure-blooded vampire directly descended from the First Primogenitor, the Lost Warlord. His vampiric kin could not be very pleased that he had aided the primogenitor of another bloodline. However...

“I don’t mind. My grandfather probably found it funny. We showed him something somewhat amusing, after all.”

Light shone through the expensive, hand-cut glass as Vattler shook his head with a smile. The look of enjoyment in his eyes seemed to leave the youth, Kira, both pleased and conflicted.

In other words, it was the same as usual.

“C, is it?”

Kira murmured with a sigh. The corners of Vattler’s lips quietly curled up in a smile.

“Had Kojou not stopped Zazalamagiu, the Gigafloat Management Corporation would no doubt have activated the circuit. That is why they placed the Priestess of Cain within the chamber. Thanks to this, we saw the other part of Itogami Island, the true form of the Demon Sanctuary, for a brief time.”

For a moment, Vattler’s blue eyes glowed crimson.

Reflected in his eyes was the building at the center of Itogami Island—Keystone Gate.

The sun was just setting over the horizon. The dazzling reflections gave the building a golden hue.

“Besides, thanks to treating the Chaos Bride well, I have received such marvelous presents.”

Drinking the crimson liquid dry, Vattler looked over his shoulder with the expression of a child who’d laid his hands on a new toy. Then, he called out to

the girls standing at the edge of the window.

“Is that not so, Hektos, Dekatos—?”

The two girls, both with beautiful, fairylike visages, replied to his address with a nod.

Depending on the angle, their thin, billowing blond hair seemed to change into the colors of the rainbow.



In the evening...

Kojou and Yukina were restlessly looking up at the clock in the hospital corridor. It was a medical facility under the Gigafloat Management Corporation, home to a medical wing that specialized in diagnosing demons and Attack Mages in the Demon Sanctuary.

Along the way, the pair had also met up with Kanon and Astarte, who were sitting on a nearby bench. They all held uneasy expressions, save for Nina, who wore a sulk instead. This was because the hospital *did not allow pets*, forcing her to pretend to be an inanimate doll.

Finally, the door that led to the diagnostics lab opened, and Natsuki Minamiya emerged. She was, as usual, wearing an out-of-place outfit—namely, an extravagant dress and a folding fan.

Kojou rushed over to her and asked, “Natsuki...how’s Celesta?”

The Attack Mage had arranged for Celesta, who immediately lost consciousness after the prior events, to be taken to that hospital. Thereafter, Celesta had undergone testing. Even if she had somehow been rescued, she’d been fused with a dark god. She’d been extremely frail, and there was concern about aftereffects and other reactions.

Natsuki looked at the worried faces on those present. “Well, aren’t you all worked up?” she remarked with a sigh. “Though it was basic testing, no signs of lingering divine essence from the dark god were found.”

She spoke in her usual, composed tone of voice.

“Then that means—,” Kojou began.

“It means that she is no longer the bride of Zazalamagiu.”

“That so...” Kojou leaned weakly against the wall. “I’m so glad.”

That eliminated the possibility someone else would go after Celesta to sacrifice her. Now, she was free.

Overhearing this, Kanon and Astarte also touched their chests in relief.

“I wonder, is Celesta’s body all right?” Yukina inquired as she supported Kojou’s slumping form before he fell to the floor.

Celesta’s flesh and blood had surely borne quite a burden from the sorcery used on her in rituals past and the strain of being bathed in divine essence. That must have affected her mentally, too.

“There are residual effects to some degree requiring treatment here on Itogami Island, but it shouldn’t be too serious. After all, unlike Angelica Hermida, she was the proper bride, meaning she had high compatibility with divine essence,” Natsuki explained in a perfunctory tone. Having only completed basic testing, she had nothing more to say about the girl’s health.

“Ahh, beyond that, it seems that the Chaos Zone is covering the costs of Celesta Ciate’s treatment and her living needs thereafter. The formal paperwork should be on its way in short order,” she added.

“The Chaos Zone—you mean Giada...? Why would she...?”

Kojou blinked, looking like he’d been slapped in the face. The Chaos Zone was only indirectly connected to the incident. In terms of nationality, Celesta herself was likely a subject of the Chaos Zone, but he didn’t think that warranted direct national support to one little girl wrapped up in an incident with another country.

“It’s not really that surprising, is it?”

Natsuki looked back his way; if anything, she seemed to find his skepticism to be strange.

“Thanks to Celesta Ciate’s incident, they were able to demand hefty reparations from the CSA. I would think this is the least they could do.”

“Ah...you have a point.”

Put that way, Kojou understood. The Chaos Zone had been the prime beneficiary of Kojou and the others interfering with Angelica Hermida's mission.

"Nothing for me or Himeragi, then..... It just doesn't feel right..." Kojou mumbled, his honest opinion trickling out.

Regardless of the fact that they'd been involved solely on Vattler's whim, Kojou and the others had faced death several times over in the process. He thought they had a natural right to demand an apology and fair reparations. Of course, he genuinely felt he didn't need a reason to rescue an acquaintance, but this was a separate issue.

Overhearing Kojou, Natsuki curiously tilted her head.

"Mmm? I think you gained something quite significant this time around..."

"...I did?"

What does she mean? he thought. Of course, he had no idea what she meant. However, that did not seem to be the case with Yukina. Abruptly, she looked up at Kojou as if just remembering something.

"Come to think of it, senpai, it seems you were using a new Beast Vassal, so —"

"...Huh?!"

Kojou's entire body seized up like a rusted gear.

Stiffly rotating his head to look back at Yukina, the hushed voice in which he spoke was the most he could manage.

"Th...that so?"

"Yes. During the battle with Zazalamagiu."

The look in Yukina's eyes made him feel distinctly uncomfortable.

The Fourth Primogenitor was said to be served by twelve Beast Vassals, but Kojou had not actually tamed them all yet, for bringing a new Beast Vassal under his dominion required acts of vampirism. That meant drinking the blood of a powerful spirit medium, the only feed suitable for a Beast Vassal.

Of course Yukina, being Kojou's watcher, knew all this. Engaging in vampiric

activities when her back was turned was a big, serious issue between them.

“Ah, come to think of it, didn’t you say at the time you had something to talk to me about?”

Kojou, feeling cornered by Yukina’s suspicious gaze, tried to force a change in subject.

“Er, yes...but...not in a place like this...”

Unexpectedly, he easily deflected Yukina. *Maybe I can get her to back off*, thought Kojou, but when he embraced that slender thread of hope, an unanticipated disturbance in the corridor only added to the chaos.

“—Kojou Akatsuki. Is this funny-looking foreigner an acquaintance of yours?” Natsuki asked with an exasperated expression on her face.

“What?”

Kojou shifted his gaze. Standing there without any aura about her was a female, silver-haired knight, wearing a military uniform modified to look more like a ninja outfit.

Of course Natsuki’s outfit stood out, but the lady knight’s appearance stood out even more. White-gowned hospital staff were glaring at Kojou and the others, wondering what in blazes was going on.

“J-Justina...what are you doing here?”

Kojou looked at her in a fair bit of shock. For some reason, Justina, said to be always covertly guarding Kanon, had come right out into the open. She was carrying a large-screen tablet PC at chest level.

“I, Interceptor Knight Kataya Justina, have been commanded by my liege, Princess La Folia Rihavein of the kingdom of Aldegia, to visit thee. Sir Kojou, please look at this.”

“R-right...”

Kojou, nodding despite not understanding, looked down at the tablet’s screen. It was a video chat being transmitted over the Net. In front of the camera sat a silver-haired girl who greatly resembled Kanon, but she was wearing an ornate, ceremonial military uniform.

“Tee-hee. It has been a while, Kojou. I am glad you and Yukina are well.”

Perhaps the silver-haired girl could see Kojou and the others as she spoke with an elegant, highly dignified, smiling face.

Kojou’s eyes popped wide at the unexpected individual’s arrival on the scene. This was a girl whose beauty was said to be the Second Coming of Freya, crown princess of the Aldegian royal family of Northern Europe, La Folia Rihavein—

She was beautiful, noble, kind, and wise, boasting enormous popularity among the populace, and basically a storybook princess, but actually, Kojou had a fairly hard time dealing with her. That was because she was so smart, he couldn’t tell what she was thinking, and on top of that, her occasional schemes frightened him.

“La...Folia...what are...?!”

“I received a report from Justina. By rights, I should drop everything and join you so that we could celebrate together, but unfortunately that wish cannot be granted.”

The beautiful princess of the Northern European kingdom of Aldegia spoke those words, lowering her eyes in apparent regret.

What is she talking about? Yukina’s stare at Kojou seemed to say.

A cold sweat broke out on Kojou’s back.

Interceptor Knight Kataya Justina was *always* monitoring Kanon from the shadows. So if there was something that she had witnessed, it had to be referring to...

“B-by report, you mean—”

“Why, this video, of course.”

At La Folia’s instruction, one of the princess’s waiting ladies operated a terminal. The chat screen cut out, only to be replaced by an already-edited video.

It showed a dimly lit cabin—one with piles of sheets, towels, and other linens used aboard a ship. In a narrow pathway between those piles sat a wounded Kojou.

Behind him was a half-naked Astarte, and in his arms rested Kanon, dressed only in her underwear.

Kojou's mind went blank as the air chilled all around him.

"Wait a... Th-this means... Don't tell me she was peeping?!"

"Justina is an excellent bodyguard, after all. I apologize for the resolution and audio."

La Folia appeared on the screen once more with a somewhat proud smile.

"Bodyguard?! Ain't this just being a photographer?!"

"You do realize that this was an illegal act of trespassing on a ship privately owned by the Duke of Ardeal? Surveillance camera footage would appear to remain in the Duke's hands, as well."

"Wha...?!"

Kojou was struck speechless. Now that she said it, it made perfect sense. At the time, Kojou and the girls were aboard the *Oceanus Grave II*. Dimitrie Vattler was the last man to let such an amusing scene slip through his fingers.

"Kanon is my precious relative, so I should count her tying her destiny to yours as a blessing. But I am a little jealous, of course. Tee-hee."

La Folia stared at Kojou, speaking in a tone that he couldn't peg as either joking or serious. Kojou felt fiercely anxious about the implied meaning of her roundabout way of speaking.

"T-tying her destiny to mine...? Um, La Folia..."

"Also, this is a message from Father. He said, 'I want to meet Kojou—and soon. Tell the bastard to say his prayers.'"

"Wait a— By your dad, you mean the king of Aldegia?! You mean at the head of his entire army...!"

"You really should take responsibility for us, then."

"Uaaaaaaaaa!" Kojou finally screamed. He hadn't even had time to notice that La Folia had deftly inserted herself into the situation. Kojou didn't know why he, who had done nothing he should be ashamed of, should find himself backed

against the wall to that degree.

“B-but that was just one act of blood donation— Kanase, come on, say something.”

If the other party concerned explained things, even La Folia would understand. It was an act of medicine. Kojou called out to Kanon with that belief. But perhaps Kanon did not grasp the situation they found themselves in; her typical, reserved little smile came over her as she lowered her eyes, visibly embarrassed.

“I—I was very clumsy, but...”

“No—! Not that—!”

Why did she repeat that of all lines? thought Kojou in despair.

With Kojou unnerved, Yukina stared at him, seemingly beside herself as she made a little sigh. *He really is incorrigible*, said her somewhat sympathetic expression.

“Himeragi—”

Seeking rescue, Kojou shifted his gaze toward Yukina.

He remembered how the two had felt like one when they struck down the dark god at the end. Yukina knew that Kojou had been injured and that he’d used a new Beast Vassal to rescue Celesta. In the end, one more time, she was the only one left for him to rely on.

“I understand,” Yukina said, nodding as she looked back at his pleading eyes. “It is all right. I already knew that you are an indecent person.”

“Whyyyyyy?!” shouted Kojou, facing the window.

And so the menace of the dark god passed, and the anguish of the Fourth Primogenitor, the World’s Mightiest Vampire, deepened just a little bit more.

A peaceful night befell the Demon Sanctuary—

Afterword

There was a bit of a gap since the publication of the last volume. Hi, it's been a while.

So *Strike the Blood*, Vol. 10 has reached the shelves.

This time, while following classic *Strike the Blood* style, I aimed to change things up a little and feature characters I hadn't had much of a chance to portray lately. It feels like Jagan, Kira, the *Oceanus Grave II* lady brigade, Nina, and Justina have settled into Itogami Island rather nicely, so I think that worked out well.

Perhaps someday I'll tell the tale of events in the Chaos Zone, not directly portrayed in this volume, from that side's point of view. It certainly feels like the queen of that foreign land is due for a return, so I think it's just a matter of waiting for the right opportunity.

I suppose my main regret this time around was not writing more scenes with Kojou and Yukina all by themselves. Since most of the story is during Nagisa's absence from the apartment, I would have liked to show off just a little more of them alone.

Beyond that, I've received requests to explain how spiritual power and demonic power are used within this series. These are simply categories that mankind arbitrarily assigned to energy drawn from higher-dimensional sources. However, the natures of the two energies are treated as polar opposites, with demonic and spiritual energy mutually canceling the other. Demons and priestesses are born with magical or spiritual pathways that enable them to control these energies. There are exceptions that can control a mixture of both, but most wielders fall into these two categories. There's no need to sweat the details, really.

In contrast, divine essence (or negative divine essence) is higher-planar

dimensional energy in and of itself, beyond the control of man or demon. Since this volume's antagonist was a god, however degraded, it was able to employ divine essence in an incomplete form.

So while I had to answer this question about the contents of the series in a roundabout manner to avoid spoilers, for those of you just fine with that, go ahead and send requests if you want me to explain anything else in a similar manner. Hole plugging is what an afterword is for...

Now then, since the publication of this work is in parallel with the broadcast of the TV anime *Strike the Blood*, why don't you give that a look, too? I hope you like it. Personally, I think it was blessed with marvelous staff that created a product all the readers of the original work can enjoy. Of course, if people watch the anime and then read the books, I'm all the happier.

I've also written a few things to contribute to the Blu-rays and DVDs currently on sale. Pick those up if you have a chance, too.

Also, the comic version of *Strike the Blood* is serialized in *Monthly Dengeki Daioh*. TATE-sensei, thanks as always for your work on the comic version, and please keep up the good work from here out!

Also, Manyako, your handling of the illustrations has been a huge, huge help to me. I always like the illustration pages for this series, but this time they're *really* something, like they're pure, yet exposed and risqué. The new characters debuting this time are cute and in great outfits—I'm extremely satisfied. Truly, thank you very much.

Last but not least, to all the staff involved in the creation and distribution of this work (to whom I caused some trouble on the scheduling front), my thanks from the bottom of my heart.

Of course, I thank all of you readers who bought this book with all of my strength.

Now then, I hope to see you again next volume.

Gakuto Mikumo

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